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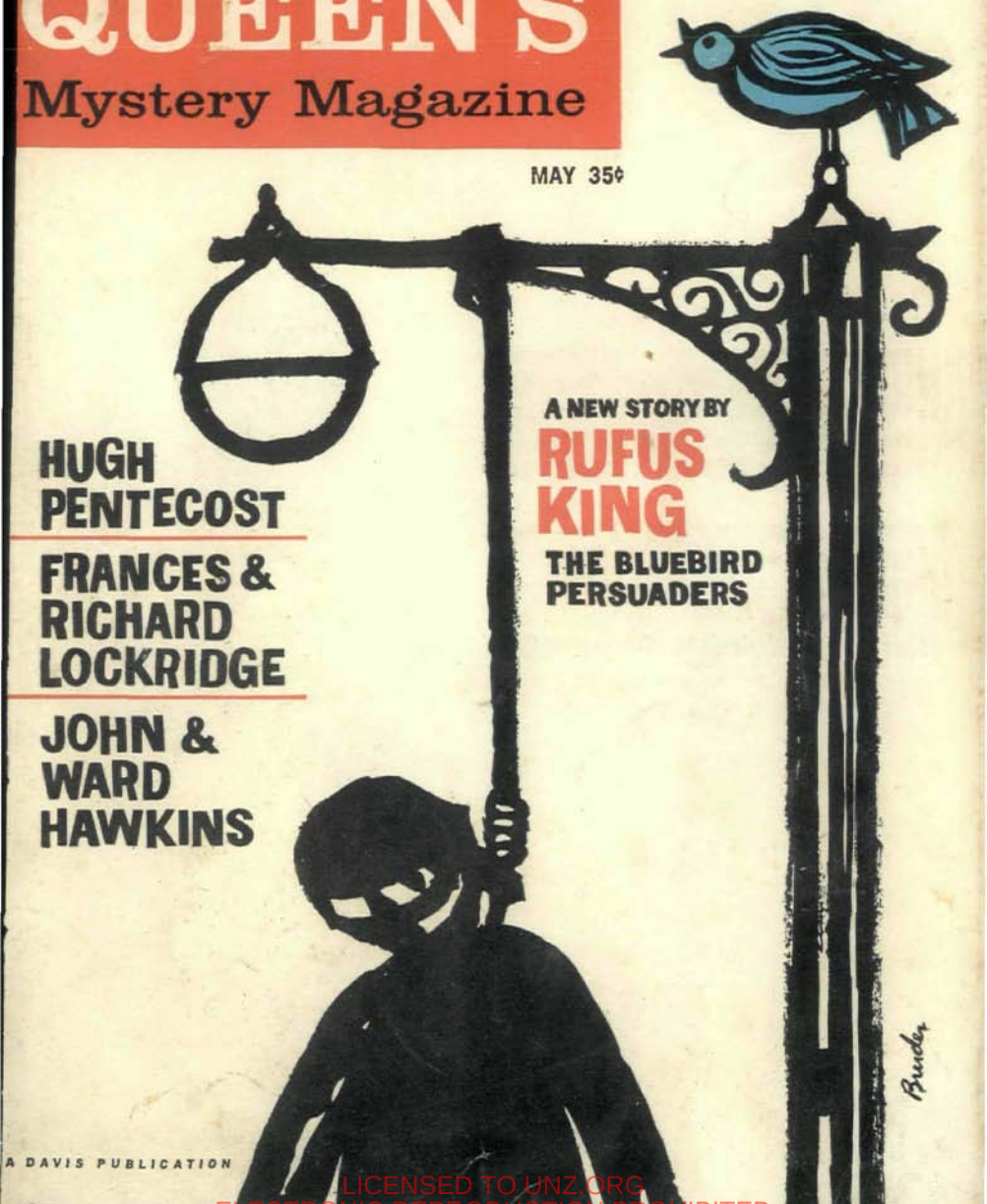

A NEW STORY BY
RUFUS KING
THE BLUEBIRD PERSUADERS

HUGH PENTECOST

FRANCES & RICHARD LOCKRIDGE

JOHN & WARD HAWKINS

Bruder

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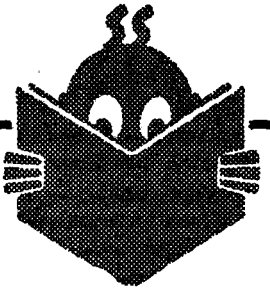

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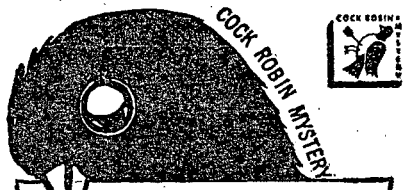

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**HUGH PENTECOST**
TITLE:	***The Bottomless Pit***
TYPE:	Crime Story
LOCALE:	Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*Dr. Fred Tucker, ex-U.S. Navy, hesitated just a moment too long—and now an innocent man, Tucker's best friend, would be murdered . . .*

IF DR. FRED TUCKER HAD NOT been so much in love with his wife, Janet, he might have acted more heroically when the crisis came. According to modern novelists, people who are into the second decade of a marriage are not supposed to be still crazy-in-love. The casual touch of a hand, the glance over the top of the morning newspaper, the sound of the front door opening at the end of a long day's work—none of these is supposed to generate a loving electricity in such people. The husband is supposed to be looking at strange women with the calculating eye of the hunter, and the wife is supposed to be wondering about her lost youth and eyeing the biceps of a sun-tanned neighbor thoughtfully.

Fred and Janet Tucker didn't fit the modern novelist's formula. And there was no question about how long they'd been married. The very active and physical presence of twelve-year-old Tommy underlined the fact that Fred had married Janet just as soon as he'd been mustered out of the Navy Medical Corps after the Japanese surrender. Even the small and not too profitable practice out in the wilds of Brooklyn hadn't reduced the complete joy that Fred and Janet Tucker took in each other. The practice wasn't profitable because Fred took care of people who often couldn't afford to pay.

They had few luxuries. It didn't

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matter, because they had each other—and Tommy. Fred was poor because he was the kind of guy he was—which is why Janet loved him so much. And Janet, dark and vivid, was a wonderful wife and mother and still an exciting love affair because she was the kind of gal she was—which is why Fred could feel a longing ache for her just walking along a Brooklyn street.

It was also why, when the Latin-looking gunman with the brown cigarillo dangling between his lips poked a .45 into Fred's stomach, he held still just too long ever to get the upper hand again. He saw the terrible fear in Janet's eyes and the wide, blank amazement in Tommy's——and he held still just a moment too long.

The one luxury the Tuckers had was The Boat. It was an old twenty-eight foot sea skiff which they kept moored at Sheepshead Bay, just off Emmons Avenue. It had been rigged up so the Tuckers could live on it during brief holidays; actually they spent a great deal of time on it, getting supper on summer nights in the galley, just lolling about on the deck watching the fishing boats come and go, and doing a little fishing and cruising on the long summer evenings. It was a hangover from Dr. Fred Tucker's tour in the Navy. A city boy, he had found the spell of salt water hard to shake after he was mustered out of service. He called the skiff *Tucker's Folly*. It was really a part of their home, and young Tommy spent more time crawling about the *Folly* than he did in the apartment.

It was on the *Folly* that Fred Tucker had hidden Bobo Gonzales on the two most critical days of Bobo's life. And it was that act of friendship that brought the Latin-looking gunman to the *Folly* on a warm evening in August . . .

Fred Tucker was not a man who listened much to things that didn't affect him directly. That was particularly true during his hitch in the Navy. There were the wounded to take care of—no eight-hour shift that. While in the service he was always in a state of exhaustion. When the time for rest came he tended to stay by himself—to sleep when he could, and to think of Janet, waiting back home, when he couldn't.

The person closest to him in his daily Navy routine was a medical orderly named Juan Gonzales. He was a native of one of the small Central American countries, but had become an American citizen and enlisted in the Navy. He had been a medical student at Columbia and was assigned to Fred. He also tended toward silence, which is why years afterward Fred had no idea which of the Central American countries was Juan's native land.

Nor did he ever know exactly where the nickname Bobo came

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from. They were too busy for personal reminiscences. But on that day off Guam, when a Japanese sub made a bull's-eye on the carrier and she went down in a sea of boiling oil, it was Bobo Gonzales who pulled Fred Tucker to safety as he was about to be consumed by a fiery sea. Fred Tucker owed his life to Bobo Gonzales; therefore he owed him Janet and Tommy too. It was a debt Fred Tucker knew he would pay whenever he was asked to pay it—gladly and without question.

But it had almost been forgotten on that day nearly fifteen years later when, just as he was closing up his office, Fred Tucker saw Bobo Gonzales walk into the waiting room. It was a thinner, older Bobo. Fred Tucker, sensitive to such things, smelled fear in the small stuffy room.

"I have come to you," Bobo said, "because you are the only friend I can ask for help without long and detailed explanations."

No hellos or how-are-yous or what-have-you-been-up-tos.

"Of course," Fred said quietly.

"As you know from the papers there is a revolution in my country," Bobo said.

Fred didn't know. He read the headlines, the lead editorial, and the sports page of his paper. He tried to remember what country it was and couldn't. It didn't matter. Bobo was his friend.

"I tell you, Fred, in confidence—I have been acting as a liaison man for the revolutionary forces here in the United States. Now I must go back. There are things in my head that only I know and that are vital to the cause. But I cannot leave for two days. I cannot travel in the ordinary way—I could not get a visa. Two days from now I will be taken to my country. But in the meantime I have been discovered by the counter-revolutionary agents here. It is a miracle that I have reached you alive." He glanced over his shoulder. "I may not leave here alive and I am risking your safety."

"What do you want me to do?" Fred asked.

"I need to stay hidden for two days," Bobo said.

It was quite simple. The revolution didn't matter to Fred—it was remote and meaningless. Maybe Bobo was on the wrong side, maybe not. What did it matter?—he owed a debt to Bobo.

Bobo had looked him up in the phone book, found him, and come to him as a last refuge. He had evidently given his pursuers the slip because no one tried to interfere when, after dark, Fred took Bobo out to the *Folly* at her moorings in the bay. He made the phone call Bobo asked him to make, and two days later Bobo was gone when Fred went out to the *Folly* with fresh supplies, cigarettes, and another bottle of rum.

Then, on a Saturday night in August, Fred and Janet and Tommy were on the *Folly*. They

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planned to spend the night aboard and start out about four in the morning to bridle one of the old wrecks in the harbor where the fishing was good, beating the charter boats and the party boats to the best location.

Janet was making coffee in the galley. Tommy was sitting cross-legged in the bow, watching the harbor lights. Fred was cleaning and preparing bait for the next day's fishing. None of them was conscious of the silent approach of a small launch, drifting toward them, her motor cut. They were totally unprepared for the little man who suddenly jumped from the launch to the stern of the *Folly,* his .45 gleaming in the moonlight. Before Fred could move from the bait tub the .45 was pressed firmly into his stomach and white teeth smiled at him.

"You will stand very still, Doctor Tucker," the man said, the brown cigarillo bobbing up and down between his lips, unlit, "and you will call your wife and son so that they can see exactly what the situation is. Then we will talk."

"What the hell is this?" Fred said. He had held still just a moment too long to make any effective counterattack. He knew instantly that this had something to do with Bobo. The gunman's English was very precise, but with a definite Spanish inflection.

"Call your family!"

They came, wide-eyed and frightened at the sight of the gun.

"You have a radio aboard?" the gunman asked.

"Yes, a battery set."

"Have the boy get it," the gunman said.

"Get it, Tommy."

"It's in the bow," Tommy said. "I was gonna listen to the ball game."

"Get it," Fred said quietly. There was no way to call for help, and no way to move suddenly in these close quarters.

"You have the time, Doctor?" the gunman asked.

Fred glanced at his wrist watch. "Three minutes to ten."

"There is no ball game at such an hour!" the gunman said.

"The Yankees are playing in Kansas City," Fred said. "Time difference."

"There is a newscast at ten o'clock," the gunman said. "It may save a lot of explanation."

Tommy came back from the bow with the radio.

"Tune it to WOR," the gunman said. "They have a newscast on the hour."

Tommy fiddled with the radio. It took time for it to warm up. When he finally got tuned in, the newscast was already under way.

"——and twenty-three men have been sentenced to death by courts-martial held in the capital city. Among those who will be shot by a firing squad at sunup is Juan Gonzales, brother of General Fernando

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Gonzales, the revolutionary leader. Juan Gonzales is a United States citizen who served in the navy in the Pacific during World War Two. He is alleged to have been acting for his brother in the United States, but is charged with being a traitor to the cause. It was he, the court-martial alleges, who ambushed and assassinated General Carrasquel, second in command to his brother, at a truce parley in the Capital City on August fourth. General Gonzales, tears streaming down his face, refused to intervene on behalf of his brother. The State Department——"

The gunman signaled to Tommy to shut off the radio.

"Does that make things clear to you, Doctor Tucker?"

"Bobo!" Janet whispered.

"Yes, Mrs. Tucker. Juan Gonzales, known to you as Bobo. He will die for his treachery in the morning. The State Department cannot interfere because they have no proof of his innocence. His brother will not interfere. So Juan Gonzales will die for a crime he did not commit—but it is a death he well deserves."

"A crime he did not commit!"

"You know that very well, Doctor Tucker." The gunman's white teeth gleamed in the moonlight. "For on August fourth Juan Gonzales lay hidden aboard this boat, a thousand miles from the scene of General Carrasquel's timely death. You might have saved him, Doctor, had you heard that broadcast without my being present. As it is, we will sit here until after the firing squad has done its work. Then I will go." He turned and smiled at Janet and Tommy. "One single move to attract attention or to leave this boat by any sort of heroic measure and Doctor Tucker dies. It is understood?"

"It is understood," Fred said.

It was clear enough. Bobo had been framed by the counter-revolutionaries. He was to be executed by his own brother for a crime of which he was innocent. Fred could prove that innocence, but he was not going to be able to do anything about it.

The gunman had backed a step or two away and seated himself in a folding canvas chair, his back to the bay. They were here to stay.

It began then—an endless treadmill of useless ideas. How to get out of this trap? How to get ashore to a phone? How to move at all with that .45 pointed at his heart? How, if he did somehow save himself, could he be certain Janet and Tommy wouldn't be chopped down?

Around and around without an answer . . .

The gunman sat with his back to the port rail. Fred sat on the deck by the bait tub. Janet was next to the single step that led down to the galley. Tommy knelt by the silent radio.

"I'm hungry," Tommy said, in

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an unaccustomed whining voice.

Scared out of his wits, Fred thought. He glanced at the gunman. "Can the boy get himself something to eat?"

The white teeth gleamed. "I do not wish to discomfort a child," he said, "but I think I should be most precise. Perhaps there is a bell or whistle that can be sounded from the galley. If I hear it I shoot—you. Perhaps there might be an accident, like a fire, that would make our position here untenable. If such a thing should happen I shoot—you. Does the boy clearly understand this?"

"He's got us over a barrel, Tommy," Fred said. "He means no tricks of any kind. You do understand, don't you?"

"Sure, Dad," Tommy said.

"There's some chocolate cake in the bread box," Janet said in a dull voice. Fred could see the fearful question in her eyes. What to do? He swallowed the green, bitter taste in his mouth.

There was nothing he could do.

Tommy went down into the galley and came back a few moments later munching on a large wedge of cake.

Water lapped against the side of the *Folly*. Less than a hundred yards away was a bait barge, with three or four men aboard preparing bait for the morning boats. There was no way to signal, and even if they could be signaled and they came—an unlikely possibility, at best—the man with the gun would shoot long before they could come aboard.

"I'm gonna get a glass of milk," Tommy said. "You want some coffee—Mum? Dad? How about you, Mister?"

"No, thank you," the gunman said politely.

Tommy was gone quite a while. They presently smelled the aroma of fresh coffee. Presently Tommy reappeared with two mugs of coffee for Fred and Janet.

"You won't change your mind, Mister?" Tommy asked.

"I said no thank you!" the gunman said sharply.

Tommy went back to the galley. After a bit he returned with his milk and some kind of a sandwich. He sat silently on the galley step, munching his snack and drinking the milk.

Hours seemed to go by, but Fred saw from his wrist watch that it was scarcely forty-five minutes.

"This peanut butter tastes awful flat without something to jazz it up," Tommy said. He headed back for the galley.

Anxiety makes some people ravenously hungry, Fred thought. Poor kid. He must be scared out of his wits.

It was a few moments later that they smelled the odor of bacon cooking in the galley. The bottomless pit of a youthful stomach, Fred thought. Tommy would go on eating and eating until thousands of

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miles away Juan Gonzales faced his executioners.

Tommy reappeared with another sandwich and a second glass of milk. He took a large bite. "It's real good with bacon added," he said, and ate with apparent contentment until the last crumb was gone.

The *Folly* rocked slightly in the wash from a tug and a string of barges that passed at some distance on the starboard side. They sat there in frozen silence, the gun aimed at Fred; Janet was a statue, and Tommy was apparently dozing with his head against the superstructure of the galley. Suddenly Tommy stirred.

"I don't know what gives with me," he muttered, "but I'm still hungry."

"You'll make yourself sick," Janet said, an automatic and meaningless phrase, spoken out of habit.

"Gee, Mum, there isn't anything else to do."

The boy went back down into the galley. *We will celebrate your betrayal, Bobo, with a peanut butter sandwich!* Fred experimented with a small movement. The gunman was instantly alert.

Tommy finally returned from the galley. This time he had two large sandwiches on a paper plate. "This stuff is real keen," he said. He turned to the gunman. "Sure you won't have a sandwich?"

The gunman smiled faintly. "The smell of bacon is very tantalizing," he said. "You should be congratulated on your son, Doctor Tucker. He is a philosopher. He plays the cards as they fall. If you will put the sandwich just there on the rail—beside me—"

Fred saw Janet move forward slightly, as if she were afraid of Tommy's being so close to the gunman. But Tommy put the sandwich on the rail and went back to his place by the galley superstructure, munching his own sandwich.

The gunman, never taking his eyes from Fred, reached out for his sandwich and wolfed half of it, hungrily. He swallowed hard to get the last of it down.

"Good, huh?" Tommy said.

The gunman made a wry face. "Not so good as I had anticipated. I am not familiar with the peanut butter. It is not my favorite—but thank you."

They sat again in silence. Far in the distance they heard the deep-throated voice of one of the big liners coming or going.

"The *Queen Elizabeth,*" Tommy said. He knew all the sailing schedules day by day.

Fred glanced at his wrist watch. He wondered just when "sun up" was in Central America. It was now nearly one. Bobo had three, maybe four hours left.

"You didn't bring any of your medical kit aboard with you, did you, Dad?" Tommy asked unexpectedly.

"I told you you'd make yourself sick," Janet said.

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"Gee, I feel great, Mum," Tommy said, "but I was wondering about the man there."

Fred turned his head sharply. In the moonlight the gunman's face was clearly visible, drenched in sweat. His mouth was drawn down at the corners. His free left hand massaged his stomach.

"I guess you're just about the only one who could save him, Dad," Tommy said mildly.

"Save him!"

At the same moment an agonized groan broke through the gunman's lips.

"I put some of that rat-killer paste we had in the galley in his sandwich," Tommy said, grave as an atomic scientist. "I figured it had a kind of cheesy taste that the peanut butter would cover up. It says it's deadly poison."

"That stuff would kill a horse," Fred said. His pulse was racing. The gunman stared at him, and Fred saw both rage and an animal plea for help in his eyes.

"Unless I help you in a matter of minutes you're going to die," Fred said to the gunman in a matter-of-fact voice.

The gun lifted, steadied, and then dropped to the deck as the gunman toppled out of the chair. "In the name of God, help me!" he cried as he fell.

It was young Tommy who pounced on the gun, like a star end falling on a loose football. Then he and the gun were in Janet's arms and she was laughing and crying.

"I figgered if I could just make him hungry enough with the cake and the smell of coffee and the bacon—" Tommy tried to explain.

"This is going to be touch and go," Fred said, bending over the moaning gunman. "You two go ashore. Janet, call Jim Ellison at police headquarters. Give him the whole pitch. He'll know what to do to save Bobo. Tommy, you come back here quick with my bag from the office—and the stomach pump. You know what it looks like?"

"Sure, Dad."

Something choked up in Fred's throat. "You sure jazzed up that peanut butter, you crazy little hero, you!" he said, unable to find the words for his real feeling.

"Gee, Dad, we couldn't let him do that to your best friend—not in the United States of America!" Tommy said.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **NORMAN DANIELS**

TITLE: ***Act of Friendship***

TYPE: Suspense Story

LOCALE: American desert

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *The story of a man who finds himself in a desperate situation and who needs help badly. But who among us is a good samaritan?*

HE STOOD, STARING THROUGH THE heat waves over the flattest country he had ever seen, alternately mopping his face and drinking from a bottle of lukewarm soda pop. Behind him, in the garage, the mechanic-owner was wheezing his way out from beneath the black sedan, its sheen obscured by the desert dust.

The mechanic arose from the oily floor and shook his head. "Just ain't no use, mister. That car ain't gonna move till there's a new bearing. Whole thing's shot."

"And you have no bearing?"

"Get one. Over in Palmerville. Take . . . lemme see . . . if Fred's got one in stock, one of the trucks can drop it off maybe tomorrow. Have your car ready next day."

"Won't do," the traveler said. "I've got to reach the Dougherty Ranch by tomorrow. It's absolutely vital I be there."

"More'n two hundred miles." The mechanic picked up the bottle of soda the traveler had set down and finished it in one long, gas-punctuated gurgle.

"The point is," the traveler said, I have to get there. Is there a bus?"

"Bus?" The mechanic thought that funny enough to slap his thigh. "Why, man, this ain't no National Highway! This here's just a two-bit road through some of the worst desert in the whole country."

"Can I rent a car?"

"Now who'd want to rent his car to a stranger. I ask you—how about that?"

"My own car would naturally remain here for security," the trav-

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eler said patiently. This was no time to blow up.

The mechanic scratched his nose and made it oilier by another dab of black grease. "Well, now, that's right, ain't it?" He squinted at the traveler as if he'd suddenly come upon a gold mine and was dazzled. "You see that truck o' mine, settin' out back?"

"I saw it." The traveler's hopes sank. The truck was about twenty years old, a battered, rusty, broken-down job loaded with empty orange crates.

"Now we could come to terms about that truck. Gotta have it back soon's I can, though. We could make a deal."

"How much?"

"Well now, lemme see. . . . Dougherty Ranch—two hundred miles each way. Reckon you'd do a mite of drivin' besides—let's say five hundred all told. Well, now, I could see my way to lettin' you have the use of my truck for . . . say . . ." He pinched his nose this time, turning it all black. ". . . say, maybe, two hundred dollars."

"That's highway robbery," the traveler protested, "and you know it."

"All I know, mister, is you gotta get some place and my truck's the only way to get there, so if gettin' there's important, it's worth two hundred dollars. That's besides costin' you for fixin' your car."

"Thank you," the traveler said. "I doubted you'd throw that in the deal." He was taking it because he simply had to. Reaching Mr. Dougherty in time was as important as keeping his job.

"Okay then?" the mechanic asked.

The traveler took out his wallet and extracted two fifty-dollar bills. "The rest when I get back."

A grimy hand snatched up the bills. "Why, sure, that'd be just fine. Now you better give me your name—after all, lendin' my truck to a stranger—"

"My name is Edward Duffield. I live in New York. That do?"

"Reckon so. Now don't get mad, mister. I don't *have* to lend you the truck nohow."

"I realize that," Duffield said. "It has occurred to me several times." He stared down the road again. "Doesn't anybody ever come by here?"

"Why, sure they do. Maybe twenty-thirty folks a day come by." The mechanic sounded indignant, resenting the implication this was a one-horse place.

"What about the police? Somebody must patrol this area. It even looks dangerous to me."

"Get caught out in it, sure is. We got County Police and a Sheriff. They come by regular, but they're all kinda busy lookin' for Noah Biggs. You see anything of an old green sedan with some bullet holes in the windshield?"

"No," Duffield said.

"Mean one, that Noah. Lives in

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that there car, mostly. Dumb . . . you know . . . he wants somethin', he just takes it. Ran a man off the road eighty miles back at Pilotsville and was gonna brain him with a piece of iron pipe 'less the man gave him his money. Sixty-two dollars he took."

While the mechanic talked, Duffield walked around to the back of the garage for another look at the antiquated, dilapidated, even dangerous-looking truck he'd rented. Its total value wasn't more than fifty dollars—probably not even that. He'd been had, that was clear, and it was just as clear that he could do nothing about it. Here the law of supply and demand was primitive enough to be looked straight in the eye.

"I'd better get started," he said.

"You'll need gas, Mr. Duffield," the mechanic said cheerfully. "Better fill her right up."

Duffield climbed aboard and finally got the shaky thing moving. He felt like a man on the fringes of a hurricane, noise and all. He paid for the gasoline, at a considerable overcharge. "Costs to bring the stuff out here." That might be true, but hardly ten cents a gallon premium.

"You gotta baby her, sorta," the mechanic screamed as Duffield started off. "She stops, there's a wire doohickey under the hood you kinda jiggle."

Jiggle a dookickey! Duffield wondered what his sleek, expensive car was going to be like when this man got through with it.

He bounced down a road that looked smooth and maybe was. This truck seemed to create its own ruts and potholes. The orange crates swayed crazily, the engine wheezed and panted as he slowly got it up to thirty-five. At least, it was better than stagnating in that garage. The thought of renting a room in one of the cabins composing the town was enough to send a man away on anything that could move.

He covered forty miles and so far as he could see, he'd been standing still. That cactus, with its arms in fixed semaphor, must be the same one he'd seen miles back. Thie two-foot elevation to his left looked like the same one he'd noted thirty minutes ago. Yet he knew they were different in the way grains of sand on a beach are different; they were separated from one another by other grains of sand —all alike. Here it was other ridges, other cacti.

By the time he had gone ninety miles he was accustomed to the rattle and the din—so accustomed that when the noise died away and the truck rolled off the excuse for a road and finally stopped, the silence was irritating. It swept in over the level, monotonous land. It was all about him, in the air and in the sand. There wasn't a sound to be heard, only that awful hush which is more intense over a des-

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ert than anywhere else on earth. Now and then, something gurgled slightly in the motor of the old truck and once he heard one of the orange crates shift slightly.

He climbed down slowly and went to the front of the ancient vehicle. The motor looked like a rusty junk pile of metal. He saw the wire to jiggle the doohickey and he jiggled it and only burned his wrist on the block. He knew nothing about motor cars. Why should he—a salesman of medical supplies? Somewhere inside the gas line, he judged, was an embolism of water or sludge. Or there was a short circuit—or maybe some integral part of the motor had fallen out along the road. It really didn't make much difference, because he didn't know how to fix it anyway.

He removed his tie, opened his shirt, and clambered into the truck to get out of the sun. It would be dark soon. The evening desert winds were already beginning to fan the sand into life. At this time of year the desert is very cold after dark—cold and lonely. He'd never known such loneliness. It compelled him to yank the choke button, push the starter, try everything in sight—but nothing happened and he finally got out again because he had to do something.

After ten minutes of fussing he was still stranded and now he was stained with grease, his clothes were dirty, and he looked as sloppy as the truck. He heard the car from a long distance and prayerfully hoped it would come this way, realizing with an uplifting note of gratitude that there was nowhere else for it to go. It was a shabby little coupe, doing about sixty-five as it approached, and seventy-five as it rolled on by, stinging his face with the sand its tires threw up. He'd had a glimpse of an elderly man behind the wheel, with the set expression of one who wouldn't be tempted by instincts of mercy.

Duffield went back to the truck and fussed again, getting even dirtier. The next vehicle was a pick-up, traveling at high speed, which it didn't slacken for an instant. Then a sedan came along, not going so fast. There were two people in it, a man driving, a woman beside him. They looked middle-aged and sensible and the car began to slow up. Duffield waved his arms in a plea for help. Suddenly the car picked up speed and almost dusted his clothes. The man was shaking his head doubtfully, the woman cowering back in what looked like fear. They'd actually been afraid of Eddie Duffield. He began to laugh, not finding anything to laugh about, but making noises for company.

Two more cars went on by at top speeds doing almost a hundred. He couldn't even see the drivers or passengers. He upended an orange crate and sat on it beside the road. The sun was lower now and the heat not so intense.

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A lizard crawled by, beady eyes on him, and didn't stop. "Why," Duffield asked the lizard, "should I expect anything better from you, my friend?"

He was going to be very late if he reached the Dougherty ranch at all. Mr. Dougherty wouldn't like it—and Mr. Dougherty was the medical buyer for one of the vast West Coast networks of city and state owned hospitals and sanitariums. He was very well known for his shortness of temper and the manner in which he'd throw over one salesman for another, whenever the mood came upon him. In a fit of humanness he had never shown before, he'd invited Duffield to his ranch to discuss a large order—one that meant a substantial bonus, besides the healthy regular commissions. Janie and the kids could buy new outfits, even take a vacation.

He was wrapped in his thoughts and didn't hear the next car until it was only half a mile away. It went by him like an express train in a subway station. He sank wearily back onto the orange crate and wondered if there were any considerate people left in the world. Certainly they must realize the old truck was stalled and that he needed help. Naturally, most of them knew that being stranded on the desert, especially at night, is an extremely dangerous situation, but it seemed none of them gave any thought to it.

The silence became oppressive. It began to irk him. Once he shouted out loud just to hear a sound. Later, the wind began moving the sand and then there was sound—the hiss of the wind, the tiny gravelly noises made by the sand being lifted and turned into playful little geysers.

He thought of the outdoor barbecue Dougherty had promised him—big chunks of roasted beef, potatoes in foil, corn cooked in the ground. He thought of hot, stimulating coffee, a whiskey and soda, drunk in comradely company.

Far to his left was a low range of mountains. He doubted the wisdom of walking there with the hope something might be on the other side. Those mountains could be towering ones, and the distance could be many miles. He'd driven the desert before and knew some of its tricks.

Another car raced on by him despite his frantic arm waving. He thought the driver screamed something at him, but he wasn't certain. Once a jackrabbit hopped inquiringly toward him and he sat perfectly still. The rabbit was huge, almost to his hips as it sat studying him and then went hopping off like a kangaroo. He thought he'd have liked it if the rabbit had a voice and spoke to him. Just one friendly word. The idea made him chuckle and he felt a little better.

He took stock of things then. It was easy to guess why none of

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the cars had stopped. He looked like a desert rat just crawled out of some crevice where he'd lived for months. The ancient truck was not an inspiring object for any motorist to come upon, and then there was that man—what was his name?—some biblical character or other—whom the police were hunting. His description had undoubtedly been put on the radio and the drivers had heard it. Whether or not Duffield looked like this dangerous man made little difference. No driver was going to stop.

It occurred to Duffield that he could depend upon no one out here—he was at the mercy of any driver who came through. In simple desperation he returned to the truck and fiddled with all the doohickey wires he could lay his hands on. After a while he guessed that perhaps he'd made things even worse, if that were possible.

Then he heard another car approach. This one wasn't going too fast and it already had its headlights on, though it wasn't quite dark yet. Duffield ran out to meet it, to throw himself down across the road for one final desperate risk. For it would soon be dark and if motorists were afraid to pick up a stranger in daylight, they'd be a dozen times more reluctant at night.

The car was slowing down, still a long distance off, and his hopes began to rise until the car made a right through the desert.

Duffield turned away, finding the sight of the disappearing car unbearable. He thought he'd better figure out how best to spend the night here. He did have a suitcase in the truck and he could use some of his clothing for cover. He brooded on the fact that if no cars stopped today, how could he expect them to stop tomorrow? But by then—possibly—this wanted man would be found and the police might be back on regular patrol.

He turned quickly when his ears picked up the sound of the car. It was the one which had turned off abruptly. Now it was coming toward him, slowly. There was a very large man at the wheel.

The car was a green, dirty sedan with one corner of its windshield broken. It answered perfectly the description of the car the wanted man had been driving.

Duffield's luck was still running bad. He'd have to convince this man he knew nothing about him and that he had nothing worth stealing. If he ever saw the eight hundred dollars in his wallet, the fugitive from the law would take it and there'd be mighty little Duffield could do to prevent him.

The car stopped and the driver got out. He wore a greasy old hat with a medium-wide brim. His shirt was blue cotton, buttoned right up to a powerful-looking neck. He had on an old torn coat and a pair of cheap khaki trous-

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ers. He was about five eleven, heavy-set, broad-shouldered, and where his pants fit tightly around the thighs, Duffield could see the smooth play of strong muscles.

"Howdy," the man said, "got yourself a mess o' trouble, friend?"

"I sure have. Doggone old truck never did behave and now it's just conked out, maybe for good."

The unwinking eyes shifted from the truck to meet Duffield's. "That there's Matt Caswell's piece o' junk. Never did travel more'n a few miles without bustin' down. Reckon you're the traveler who burned out a bearin' on his own car and rented Matt's. That right?"

Well, at least there was no need for subterfuge. "That's right," Duffield said. "I'm a tenderfoot when it comes to this desert, and I'm badly in need of help."

"Lemme have a look at 'er," the big man said. He walked to the truck and tinkered with it. He glanced up at Duffield with a grin. "My name's Noah Biggs."

"Ed Duffield. Glad to know you."

"Now that's a real funny thing. My dad's name was Ed too. Now I meet another man named Ed. Sure a funny thing." He went back to work, but gave up after a few minutes. "Ain't nothin' I can do with this. She's plain wore out."

"Could you—could you drive me to the nearest town? I—have a little money to pay you."

"Reckon so, 'cept I got personal reasons why I can't. That don't mean I won't. No sir, don't mean that at all. But these here personal reasons make it better for me if I waited till tomorrow. Yes sir—the later tomorrow, the better."

"If that's the best you can do, Mr. Biggs."

"Say, I got named good, didn't I? I'm a big cuss all right. You think so, Ed?"

"Big as any two men, Noah."

Noah took four orange crates out of the truck and threw them in the back seat of his car. He opened the door for Duffield who had gone for his coat and suitcase.

"Figure we'll head for them hills and camp out where there's brush for me to hide in. I'm kinda wanted by the law. Maybe you heard?"

There was little sense in denying it. "Yes, I heard. What you did is none of my business. I just need help."

Noah smiled that slow grin of his and went around to get into the car. The foothills were a twenty-five minute drive over desert without roads, but the green car took it well, They didn't say much until Noah stopped and got out. He looked the area over and then hauled out the orange crates.

Duffield watched, in some amazement, as Noah tore them apart with his hands and built a fire of them beyond a low ridge where the flames wouldn't be read-

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ily seen, though they were miles from the road by now. From the green car came a frying pan, coffee pot, and stew pot, and in short order beans were bubbling, coffee boiling, and bacon spitting in the pan. They ate directly out of the pans, but there were two thick mugs for the coffee which was surprisingly good.

I'm going to pay for this, Duffield thought, so I might as well enjoy it. He had the last of the coffee and leaned back against the wheel of the green car. Noah, hunkered down on the sand, was a flame-lit giant on one side, a dark monster on the other.

"Been on the run long?" Duffield asked.

"I'm forty-six years old, by the way I reckon, but I could be wrong a mite. Anyways, I started runnin' when I was fourteen and I never stopped. Sorta got used to it."

"You never stopped in all that time?"

"Sure I did," he grinned. "But every time that happened, I would wind up in reform school or in jail. Times I earned my way, pickin' fruit down in the Coachella. Know that valley? Pretty place. Part of the desert they bring water to. I like the desert. It's quiet. It don't holler at you like a town hollers at you. Nothing unfriendly out here 'cept maybe a rattler or two, and they mind their own business well as I mind mine."

"Didn't you ever want to settle down?"

"Reckon every man wants that, but I got me some fussy wants." He leaned back on one elbow and nudge the fire with a bit of wood. "Folks never done me only harm, so I don't like 'em much. I got me a mighty desire to get me some lumber and build me a shack. With my own hands, just the way I like it. I could buy me a little spit of ground down that Coachella country. I could buy me grub and some tools. Fishlines, maybe some chickens. Warm country down there—real nice country. Desert's my home and I'd feel like that's where I want to be. Maybe I'd so some plantin' in the spring, croppin' in the fall. Nothin' in between—no sir—I ain't what you'd call a laborin' man."

"Think you'll ever make it, Noah?"

"Nope, reckon not."

"Why? Because of the trouble you're in?"

"Wouldn't seek me out there. Nope, it's money. Take a heap of it to do what I wanta do."

"You got some from that man you attacked," Duffield said. "Are you starting on a crime wave?"

"Me? Heck, no! I could tell the way that happened and all, but it don't make no difference. 'Sides, I'm dog beat. Sleep in the car, you wanta. I'm fine right here."

He lay back, wadded his hat into a small pillow, placed one great

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hairy arm over his eyes, and was asleep in a minute or less. Duffield quietly returned to the car and climbed in. He sat down on a length of iron pipe and it gave him a start. Maybe he'd feel the weight of it before this was over. He'd have to be very careful. It was true that Noah was a stupid man, but hardly so stupid as to talk that much about himself unless he was prepared to take measures that the information he had imparted would go no further.

It was perfectly true that Noah was in complete command here on the desert, but perhaps he could be talked, or bribed, into going to town. Of course, if there was any way to get clear of him here and now, that would be even better, but fool that he was, he'd have the car keys . . .

Duffield quickly fumbled around the dashboard. The keys were in the ignition. He scrambled behind the wheel, turned the key, felt for the starter—then hesitated. If he didn't get away fast, Noah would kill him. Perhaps the car would be slow in starting, or buck under an unfamiliar hand. Anything might happen and give the whole show away. Better to wait and be sure of what he was doing.

Duffield slid from behind the wheel, curled on one of the seats, and went to sleep, thinking that if he couldn't outthink a man as stupid as Noah he'd deserve whatever happened to him.

When he awoke, it was dawn. A bright red morning with a fireball of a sun that promised to make the desert boil. Noah was already up and tending a new fire where more coffee, beans, and bacon were cooking briskly. One meal was like another to a man of his intellect, but despite this, no coffee ever smelled so good.

Duffield didn't move, except to close his eyes. He was refreshed and thinking better this morning. He was in trouble so far as Dougherty was concerned, but if he could drive up to the ranch and tell Dougherty he'd been delayed because he brought a dangerous and wanted man to the sheriff's office, the spirit of adventure that was so dominant in Dougherty's makeup would impel him to forgive everything. Dougherty belonged to the Sheriff's Patrol, the Civilian Defense, and the Marshal's Riders, a private club of wealthy men who rode gallantly out to find lost dogs and missing children.

Yes, that would do it. All that good barbecue food wasted wasn't likely to improve Dougherty's temper—but if Duffield described Noah Biggs, told of his crimes, proved he turned him in, now that would make Dougherty blink and say he wished he'd been along. Be something to tell his wife and the kids too.

Duffield reached down and let his fingers touch the iron pipe.

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"Gonna be a hot day," Noah called loudly from the fire. "We gotta get started pretty soon, so come and eat, Ed."

Duffield slid out of the car, finger-combed his hair, sat down on the sand, and helped himself to the food. "Get started for where?" he asked.

"I been figurin', Ed. I'll run you clear to Patch Forks. Big enough town. You can get a ride to where you're goin' easy. Or one back to your car."

"Won't that be dangerous for you?" Duffield asked.

"Heck, that don't make no difference. Besides, they won't be lookin' for me so early in the mornin'. Take my chances. I go to jail—I been there before."

This was easier than Duffield had anticipated. Once in that little town all he had to do was yell Noah's identity and leap from the car. No roughhouse, no danger of being hit by this giant of a man. He began eating faster because he was in a hurry to get this over with.

They piled everything into the green car and it bounced and bumped over the desert to where the old truck was still stalled. They kept going, both men silent most of the distance.

Then Noah said, "Reckon I could fetch other folks a knock on the head like I gave Matt after you left him, and rob 'em like I did Matt and I'd get maybe three hundred so fast I could buy me that place down the Coachella. Reckon it wouldn't be hard nohow."

"You never can tell," Duffield said nervously.

"I fetched Matt a good one, but I told him it wasn't right to run over a jack and not stop and see was he dead or only hurt. Why, man, he left that poor jack in the middle of the road, just pullin' hisself in the sand like a man who didn't have no legs. The buzzards got him alive, I reckon. That's why I made Matt stop and I told him it was bad to do. And he laughed at me and started swingin', so I popped him one. Then all that money rolled outa his pocket, so I said if I took it that'd punish him so he'd remember he's gotta stop and see is a jack hurt or dead."

That was the old soft soap, unskillfully applied, and it wasn't going to work. Duffield had the piece of iron pipe down on the seat beside him. If Noah made any attempt to get at him, he meant to use it, but he felt reasonably certain he could talk the man all the way into town.

When they reached the outskirts of the hamlet, Duffield's anxiety began to grow. This was too easy. He laid his coat across his lap and felt the outlines of his wallet, thinking perhaps Noah might have taken it.

Noah said, "Reckon you kinda figured I was fixin' to hurt you some, Ed."

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"Why, no, not at all," Duffield said quickly.

"I kinda guess what you got told about me by Matt at the garage where you left your car. They don't like me there, on account of they're lazier'n I am, but they don't like me around for their womenfolk to compare them with. Seems I kinda win out when they do. 'Sides, I got me a mind of my own and I tell them what I think, and they don't like that neither."

Duffield knew the time was right now. They were just entering the town. He looked directly at Noah. "Well, Noah, what are your intentions about me?"

"Why, I'm aimin' to set you down where you can get a bus or maybe rent a car. That's all."

"Do you know how much money I'm carrying?"

"No sir, none of my business. Look here, Ed, I ain't the kinda man robs folks. I just got the name for it without the fact it ever happened much. Even if I was that kind, I sure couldn't rob you."

"Why not?"

Noah's smile disappeared and the corners of his mouth went down. "Reckon you hafta ask that, Mr. Duffield, you wouldn't understand if I told you." He swung the car to the curb. "You can get out here."

Duffield's fingers relaxed their grip on the iron pipe. "Tell you what, Noah. I'll take your coat and you keep mine."

"My coat's all rags, Mr. Duffield You don't have to do nothin' for me."

"Listen, Noah, they're after you! Even here in this town they'll know you're wanted. You helped me, so I'll help you. Where's the bus stop?"

"Any place you hold up your hand."

"All right. We'll sit here and wait. When the bus comes along, you wear my coat and step out and raise your hand and take the bus all the way to Coachella. Is that clear?"

"I'd like to, Mr. Duffield," he said slowly. "Yep, I sure would, but a man's got to have . . ."

"There's money in the coat."

"No, I can't do that."

"I'm buying your car. I need it."

The big head wagged from side to side. "No sir, can't do it."

"You do as I say or I'll turn you in," Duffield said severely. "Besides, I'm *asking* you to do this and you have to."

"I don't see why," Noah said stubbornly. The bus was now coming down the road and he watched it longingly.

"What was the word you were going to call me? Wasn't it—friend?" Duffield asked. "I'm your friend. You're mine. You have to do as I say in this case or you'll lose my friendship and I'll lose yours. I don't want that to happen."

"Like you said—friends," Noah

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said. He opened the car door. "There's more'n fifty dollars in this here coat, you got cheated."

"No, I didn't. Now stop that bus—and don't worry again. Nobody will ever look for you. Buy your lumber and build that shack. I wish I could, but if I can't I'm mighty glad a friend of mine can. Goodbye, Noah."

Their hands met for an instant. Duffield's was as grimy as Noah's. Then Noah flagged down the bus and swung aboard, and Duffield sat back and planned what he'd tell the police.

He'd been kidnaped by Noah, he'd escaped and taken his car and his coat, and Noah had gone over the high mountains in flight . . .

"Over the mountains you describe," the Deputy Marshal said, "and that's the end of Noah. Just straight desert—all sand. He'll be dead by tonight. Not even he could survive there."

They took down the rest of Duffield's story and they let him call Mr. Dougherty and repeat it. It wasn't a bad story at that. He didn't include the fact that Noah had stopped to lend him a hand when nobody else would, even though the danger to Noah was considerably more. He didn't bother to mention it, because it was merely the act of a friend, the act of friendship.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHORS: **JOHN & WARD HAWKINS**

TITLE: ***Little Boy Missing***

TYPE: Detective-Crime Novelette

LOCALE: Puget Sound, Washington

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Four-year-old Robin had disappeared. The police were sure he had fallen into the river and drowned—they had evidence. But the boy's father disagreed: he was just as sure the boy had been kidnaped . . .*

GENE TORSEN STOPPED HIS BATtered pickup truck at the front gate of the Linn home, on the outskirts of Riverville, a small fishing village on Puget Sound. He cut the motor and got out to stand for a moment, bracing his shoulders against the ache that lay along his spine.

He was a young man, tall and lean. His yellow hair was wetly combed, his long jaw freshly shaven. The clothes he wore were good enough—a dark suit, a white shirt, a tie—but he wore them with little comfort. His strong, tanned throat hated the tie; his wide shoulders and big arms needed more freedom than the coat gave him.

He left the pickup and went through the gate, walking slowly, with the careful, saving stride of a man who was bone-tired.

Mary Linn answered his ring.

A thin, spare woman, she looked at Gene with quick brown eyes. In her fifty years she'd learned a few things about men. One of them was that a man, hard-driven and angry, didn't want a woman prying at him with questions.

"Come in," she said. "There's coffee."

"No, thanks," Gene said. "I'm on my way to Bayport."

Town was the last place he should be heading for, Mary Linn thought. Bed was the place for him, and an around-the-clock sleep. If he'd had any sleep at all the past

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five days, he'd got it standing up.

But another thing she'd learned was that if you told a man like Gene he was licked and ought to quit, you only started a fight of your own. The thing to do, if you could manage it, was to steer him around in circles close to home until his weight and weariness dragged him down.

"Will you do me a favor before you go?" she asked.

"Well—" Gene said. "Yeah, I guess so."

Mary Linn nodded her head toward the mouth of the Nesko River. "Petey's out there again," she said. "She's—well, you know—looking. She hasn't missed a low tide, night or day, since it happened. I say it's not good for her; you know why. But she won't listen to me. Maybe she'll listen to you."

"I'll give it a whirl," Gene said. "But what I came for—Will you tell your old man I'm not going out for a few days? If he wants to use my boat and gear he might lay in an extra dollar."

"I'll tell him," Mary Linn said.

Gene left her, going back through the gate and taking a path that led west along the north bank of the river. Now he found his eyes searching among the snags on the muddy river flats laid bare by the low tide. That was what Petey would be doing along here somewhere, or out on the beach.

Heartbreaking work, sure enough. If she found anything it would only be proof that losing Robin was her fault. But still she looked. The girl had courage—give her that. But her mother was right. Too much of this kind of heartbreak would ruin anybody.

His mind went back to the day after his wife's funeral, two years ago. He'd come home, to find Petey Linn sitting on his front porch. "Somebody has to take care of Robin while you're fishing," she said. "It might as well be me." He'd stood looking at her. She was a thin and freckled-faced girl with shy brown eyes; she wore shirt and jeans, as usual. About the size of a wet cat, but the answer to his biggest problem.

"I could use a little help," he'd said.

He'd come home the next night to find the house scrubbed, shining, and shipshape. The table had been set and there'd been a note for him: "Your supper's in the oven. I got Robin over at our house. I guess I am not much of a cook. P.S. Yell over when you want him."

There'd been a kind of meat-loaf deal in the oven and a thin, lopsided cake in the cupboard. She hadn't been much of a cook—not then, anyway—but she'd done her best. Paying her was a battle he'd hardly ever won.

Gene climbed to the top of a sand dune and paused. The wide sweep of Puget Sound lay before him. The mouth of the Nesko River was on his left, slashed with sand bars. Sit-

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ka Head was on his right at the far end of a mile-long, curving beach, a rocky, timbered hogback that lay out in the Sound, tipped at the snout by the white pencil of Sitka Light. Easter Island and Fox Island were three miles offshore. Fox Island was farmland, low and flat; Easter Island held a federal prison. The channel between the two was the water Gene usually fished. He hadn't been out in five days and the way things were going now it would be longer than that before he got out again.

He discovered Petey Linn a quarter of a mile away. She was small in the distance, hardly more than a dot at the end of a long double trail of footprints that followed the water's edge. Gene saw her pause and search through some cast-up debris. He went down the slope to meet her, his jaws tight. He yelled while they were still some distance apart.

"Petey! Quit it now!"

He lengthened his stride, closing the distance fast. He was angry—at her for doing this, at himself, at all the things that had caused it. But while she was still a dozen yards away, his anger vanished. She'd been crying. He went to her and caught her by the arms.

"Petey, for the luvva Mike!" he said. "What do I have to do to make you quit this? Tie you up?"

She said, "If he's here, I want to know it."

She looked up at him, her eyes wide and brown. There were tired shadows beneath her eyes. Her pallor made the dusting of freckles across her nose stand out clearly. She pushed at her short, wind-tumbled hair with a brown hand, trying to turn away.

Gene turned her back. "You're wasting time out here," he said. "Robin didn't fall in the river. Those people took him."

"Do you really believe that, Gene?"

"Yes," he said. "You're a better sailor than most men. If you tied Robin in that life jacket, you tied him right. He couldn't have got loose accidentally. That leaves only one answer: the people took him."

"The police decided he fell in," Petey said.

"Sure," Gene said. "They dragged his coat and hat and one shoe off the river bottom. That's it, they say. The body's hung up on a snag, or the crabs got it. I say it's a bum steer. I say the people you saw threw the clothes in the river to make us think he drowned." He turned Petey, starting home. "Did they ever find the people? Tell me, did they?"

"No . . ." Petey said.

In her heart she knew they hadn't really tried. Captain Harris had never said he thought she was lying, but there'd been no belief in his heavy face. She couldn't describe very well the people she saw, that was why. She'd had only a glance at them from her bedroom window, a hundred yards from the landing.

Robin had been there, secure in a

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life jacket and tied to the landing, waiting for Gene and a ride up the river to the cannery. The woman, a big woman in a print dress, had been fishing. The man, a heavy-set man in a loud shirt, had walked from Robin to the woman's side, limping, as though both feet hurt.

No, it wasn't much of a description. It was—she had to face it—the sort of thing a young girl would make up to hide her own carelessness.

And there was something else: Why would the man and woman take Robin?

No one could answer that question. Not Petey, not Gene. Not Captain Harris. Nobody. Gene had nothing with which to pay a ransom. He owned a fishing boat and a small house; he never had more than a few hundred dollars in the bank. It wasn't reasonable that anyone would steal a four-year-old child without a motive. And Captain Harris was a bluntly reasonable man.

"One of three things happened to that boy," he'd said. "He was kidnaped. Or he got loose and wandered away ashore. Or he got loose and fell in the river. Kidnaping's out—Torsen can't pay a ransom. We've covered every foot of land for miles, and I'll swear he's not ashore anywhere, dead or alive. But we did find some of his clothes in the river. Maybe it's not final proof, but it looks to me like it's all we're going to get."

"Missing and presumed dead by drowning."

That had been the official verdict. That had been the official end of it. But not for Gene. He said he believed Petey'd seen a man and woman. He said they had taken Robin, for some reason. And the papers had printed his statement: "If the people who took Robin will contact me, I will do anything to get my son back alive."

He kept saying the people who'd taken Robin would read that and come to him sooner or later. But Petey didn't know. She just didn't know.

Gene said, "You're going to quit prowling the beaches. D'you hear? You're just wearing yourself out for nothing."

"It's not for nothing," she said.

If she found nothing at all, it would prove to her at least that Robin hadn't drowned. In spite of the police talk of crabs and snags, the Sound would give up something. If she found something—well, she would have an answer. A terrible answer, yes, and the end of a dream she'd had since she'd been old enough to dream. But an end, too, of not knowing.

Anything was better than not knowing.

Gene said, "You're the only one who saw that man and woman. You say you'd know the guy by the way he walks. Okay. How about going into Bayport tomorrow and hunting for him?"

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Petey stopped. "If they lived in Bayport and had Robin, the police would have found them. If they live somewhere else, they wouldn't come to Bayport. It's too close."

"We don't know who they are or why they took him," Gene said. "Until we get those answers we can't say no to anything. I don't mean for you to go into town and stand on street corners. You've got to have a system. Those two have to eat. Ask at the stores if they have anybody coming in who walks like he does. Show them how he walks. Imitate him, like you did for me."

Quietly she said, "It's stupid."

"Hey," he said, "I'm just trying to—"

"I know. You're trying to help me. I don't want that kind of help. Yell at me, if you want to. Say it's my fault Robin was drowned or stolen. But don't pity me! I'm not a child. Treat me like a woman or leave me alone!"

"So you're a woman," he said. "That's okay with me. But you're still going to do what I tell you. No more of this beach walking. If you don't like Bayport, we'll think of another town. But you're going to hunt that guy. Hear me?"

Petey's small hands were fists. They were going to think of another town, any town, if she didn't like Bayport. It was no use. Telling him she wasn't a child didn't make any difference. Where he was concerned she was still the skinny little kid who'd come to take care of his boy two years ago. She stood there, biting her lips, glaring at him.

Then she turned and ran.

Gale Saunders was working at her typewriter when Gene Torsen came into the city room of the *Bayport Press*. She was a tall, handsome girl, long of leg and high of breast. She wore her yellow hair in gleaming coils. She was doing a story on a lumber mill fire, and when Gene reached her desk she did not look up; the clattering of her typewriter did not stop.

"Please," she said. "No talking to the motorman."

Gene said, "I've got all night, Gale, to wait, so take your time."

Gale looked up then. "Gene!" She stood up, to take both his hands in hers. "Nice to see you." She searched his face with troubled eyes. "Man," she said, "you're going to fall in a heap if you don't get some rest."

"I've got a couple of questions," Gene told her.

"I'm your girl," Gale said. "But not here." She got up from the typewriter, found her purse, and took his arm. "I can't think in all this clatter." She led him out of the building and across the street to a restaurant. "Coffee," she said. "For both of us."

Gene smiled at her when the coffee came. "Now?"

"Shoot," she said.

"It's that newspaper story," he said. "The last one you wrote.

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Where I said I'd do anything to get Robin back, if they'd contact me. Is that local, or does it go all over?"

"All over, Gene," Gale said.

She explained how a press service worked. Newspaper offices everywhere were tied together by teletype circuits. A local wire for local stories, the "B" wire for copy important west of the Mississippi, and the "A" wire for news of interest to all the United States and the world. The story of Robin Torsen—a missing boy, a wide search—had been carried by most of the papers in the country.

"That's a help," Gene said. "No telling where those people went to. They wouldn't stick around close, with all the search going on. I'd run an ad, if I thought it would reach them quicker."

"No need," Gale said. "They'll see the story."

Gene's eyes came up soberly. "Thanks, Gale," he said.

"It's the way I earn my living," she said. "Forget it. And I'm not done yet. If you don't get action in a week or two, I'll do a Sunday feature."

"I'll get action," he told her. "I've got to."

To herself, Gale said, "Lord, I hope so."

She had known Gene in nearby Riverville—Fishtown, to those who lived and worked there. She had been deeply in love with him—Gale Saunders, the editor of the high school paper, and Gene Torsen, the star fullback. Gene, big and gentle and clean-eyed, had had the gift of quiet even then; he'd learned it fishing the lonely reaches of the Sound. They'd made all the standard plans; at least, she'd planned, and he'd listened and had agreed. Robin might very well have been her son. Looking back, Gale couldn't say just how her path and Gene's had pulled apart. She'd worked in the office of the Riverville *Weekly Clarion* and when the little paper had expired in a welter of unpaid bills she had moved on to Bayport, and then to even bigger towns. Letters, then notes, then only Christmas cards to bridge the years. She'd sent a toy boat when Robin was born; she'd wired flowers when Gene's wife died suddenly.

When word of Robin's disappearance had reached her desk, she'd badgered her boss until he sent her to Bayport so she could cover the Riverville story. Throughout the search she'd watched Gene drive himself beyond his strength. Robin, the snub-nosed and freckled little guy, had been the core of Gene's life. The loss was beyond measuring.

"You'll get him back," she said.

And she turned the talk to remembered things: the day she'd gone swimming near the mouth of the Nesko and the Morris twins had stolen her clothes. Gene, inbound on the *Skipjack*, had found

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her there. "You were a gentleman," she said. "You turned your back when I came aboard. You threw me a pair of overalls."

"Your Pop reached for a shotgun when I brought you home," he said, "and I set a new record for the mile run." A faint grin softened the harsh lines at the corners of his mouth. "Y'know," he said, "Riverville's proud of you. People there remember you and your folks. They get a kick out of seeing your name on stories in the papers."

"Some success. Today you've got a byline on page one, tomorrow you're wrapped around a fish." She shook her head. "I'm still a small-town girl at heart, I guess. Tidewater and fishing boats and sleepy streets. I didn't know how homesick I was for Riverville until I went back." She touched Gene's hand. "Skipper, I wish you luck."

He took that thought with him, down the weary miles to Riverville, to the cold and empty house that stood above the landing on the bank of the Nesko. But before the next day was done he knew he'd need more than luck to see him through. He'd need a store of patience and he had never been a patient man. He had never learned to sit and wait and now he had to wait. He had to watch the mailbox and listen for the ringing of the telephone. The word would come —today, tomorrow, next week. He had to believe that. He had to be here when it came.

The days were all alike. Jake Linn, Petey's father, took the *Skipjack* out in the early morning. Petey Linn walked the road to Riverville and the Bayport bus. The mailman's car dragged its plume of dust up to Gene's mailbox, bringing a circular.

Ed Kennedy stopped to say hello. He was Riverville's constable, a tall and gangling man, with long nose, long chin. He'd directed the search for Robin until the State Police took over.

"I'm sorry it turned out the way it did," Ed said. He rubbed the gray stubble on his cheek. He was a good friend and it wasn't easy for him to say what he had to say. "I'd keep on hunting, Gene, but there's no place we haven't looked. If it does turn out we're wrong about the river gettin' him, I hope you'll call me first."

"Depend on it," Gene said.

Late that afternoon Petey appeared, small and tired. She walked around the house to let herself into the kitchen and cooked a meal for him.

"I've been doing it for two years," she said, when he objected. "It's my job." She bit her lip. "Or maybe you only wanted me for a baby sitter."

"Petey," Gene said, "what's eating you, anyway?"

"If you don't know," she said, "I can't tell you."

Gene left it there. The kid was

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worn thin and worried sick, and only getting Robin back could change that. There was nothing he could do for her, or for himself, but wait. And each day was like the day before. Only the weather changed. A brief storm gave way to cold, clear skies. The nights were utterly still, and the morning mist thickened into fog that hung on through most of the day.

Gene watched the road, listened for the ringing of the telephone. His conviction never weakened. He wasn't sure why, but in his heart he knew that sooner or later contact would be made. It had to be.

And on the sixth day it was.

Gene had gone out of the house, down to the landing. A blue dusk lay across the river, a bank of fog was moving slowly in from the Sound. This was Robin's bedtime. The shadow of the boy—snub nose, clear eyes, freckles—bothered Gene less when he was out of the house.

The *Skipjack* rode gently against her fenders. Well made, well kept, she was a work boat, a rough old girl and no Sunday sailor's toy.

Gene went aboard. Jake Linn had left her clean. Her deck was freshly mopped, her working gear was stowed, her bilge dry. Gene lit the cabin lamps and broke out a coil of new manila rope. The best found boat could always use another line. He was finishing an eye-splice when he heard a footfall on the landing.

"Hey," a man said. "Anybody home in there?"

A stranger's voice, softly pitched against the quiet, without harshness, without depth. A landsman's voice—no sailor would ever use those words.

Gene was suddenly and quietly sure that the moment he'd waited for had come. A short ladder led up and aft to the wheelhouse. The wheelhouse was dark, the door hooked open. Gene didn't leave his seat on the bunk.

"Sure," he answered. "Come aboard."

Feet thudded clumsily on the cockpit deck. The shadow of a man blocked the wheelhouse doorway, came through to crouch at the head of the ladder.

Gene could see the heavy face of a man in his early thirties; thick lips, a blue jaw. Round black eyes surveyed the cabin, the small galley forward, sink, stove, dishracks, the bunks.

"Nice rig yuh got here."

Gene said, "She'll do."

"I expect." The man looked at Gene now. "My name's Hudson—Walt Hudson. You're Torsen, the fella that lost the boy?"

Gene nodded.

The man made a sympathetic sound. "Tough. I see in the papers where the cops figure he fell in the crick. That's what comes of livin' close to the water, I guess."

Gene's mouth was dry. "He didn't fall in."

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"No?" the man said.

"Somebody took him," Gene said.

"Yuh don't say!" The thick lips pursed. "Somebody grabbed him, eh?" Gene was certain now. The man was playing his part clumsily; he wasn't bright enough to do it well. "Who'd go and steal a man's kid?"

"I'd like to know," Gene said.

"You would, eh?" the man said. "Maybe I can help you."

He shouldered his way through the narrow hatch, stumbled on the ladder. Standing in the passage between the head and the battery and tool compartment, he almost filled it, but he was not tall. He wore a loud sports shirt, open at the throat, a sports coat with big pockets, filled now with either hand. The dark flesh of his face was oiled with sweat, the cloth of his shirt was stained with it.

He stood looking at Gene. Petey, for all the distance between her window and the landing, had described him well.

"You're going to help me?" Gene asked.

"Yeah," the man said. "Brace yourself, sonny." He brought his left hand slowly out of his coat pocket; he tossed something into Gene's lap. "Seen anything like that before?"

It was a shoe. Robin's shoe—the mate of the one the police had brought up from the river bottom. The leather was soft and dry. This shoe had never been in the water of the Nesko.

Gene let his breath go in a long sigh. "Where'd you get it?"

"Where'd you think?" the man said. "From your kid."

Gene looked down at the shoe again. He thought of that long search, scouring every foot of land in miles; the sick heartbreak, the aching torture. All that work, all those tears—this man had caused them. Gene felt the tightening of back and shoulder muscles.

His eyes lifted. "Where is he?"

"I got him," Hudson said.

There was a roaring explosion in Gene's head. Reason left him, control left him. He was on his feet, the manila line still in his hand.

Hudson set his back against the bulkhead. His black eyes were glittering, his right hand stayed in his coat pocket. His sweating face showed surprise but not fear.

"You said in the paper you'd do anything—"

He got that much out before the loop of the eye-splice slashed him across the face. The line was stiff and new, a hard manila whip, and all the strength of Gene's arm was in the blow. It didn't matter what he'd said. He was in the grip of a fury that demanded satisfaction; here was the man who'd taken his son.

The slashing blow brought a ragged curse of pain from Hudson's lips. His left hand grabbed the line. Gene let him have it, dig-

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ging hard fingers into the man's shirt.

"Where is he?"

"I'm telling yuh. Cut it—"

Gene clubbed him with a knotted fist, a hooking blow that found Hudson's mouth and started a flow of blood across his heavy chin. Hudson swore again. His left arm was up, driving at Gene's throat. He was a bull for strength, that arm was a barrier of iron. But Gene swung at Hudson's head.

"I'll kill you—"

"No, yuh won't!" Hudson's voice was savage. "You think I came here without a squeeze? You don't get that kid back if you don't play it my way. I got yuh tight! I'm not kiddin', boy. This ain't games with me. You get that kid back when you *earn* him back. Not before!"

Gene still held him. He shoved the man hard against the bulkhead; his face was close to Hudson's face, meeting the stare of those black eyes. He couldn't let go of the man. His hands and his heart wanted blood—right now.

But gradually sanity came back to him. Beating Hudson was no good, killing him was no good. Even though he knew this, still the hardest thing he'd ever done was to take his hands away from Hudson.

"Okay," he said.

"Sit down," Hudson said.

Gene backed slowly to the bunk. "Okay."

Hudson's shirt was torn, hauled free of his belt. He made no effort to put it back. Nor did he wipe the blood from the corner of his mouth. Now he took his right hand from his coat pocket. It held a snub-nosed revolver.

"Right in your belly all the time," he said. "Yuh went nuts, didn't yuh?" He showed his teeth in a tight grin. "I figured all the angles. I wouldn't have come here if I didn't have yuh in a squeeze. Something happens to me, the kid goes out. Got that?"

"Yes," Gene said.

"Smart boy!" Hudson shook his head. "I ain't got a lot of time. I gotta get back pretty quick or that kid's a goner . . . Listen: I got a job for you to earn that kid. It ain't much. A little ride in the boat, here. Before I tell yuh— You got a tight jaw?"

"Yeah," Gene said.

"Y'better," Hudson said. "We're gonna watch every move you make —and get that *we!* Everything yuh do from now on we're gonna know about it. Make one pass at the cops, just one, and the kid's dead. I got a sack, wire, and fifty pounds of scrap iron ready and waiting."

Gene said, "What do I do?"

"I got a friend on Easter Island," Hudson said. "He don't like the weather out there. He wants out."

Slowly Gene said, "The Federal Prison!"

So this was it . . . "Why would anyone take your son?" Captain Harris had asked. This was why: a

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crush-out, a prison break. There was a three-mile stretch of cold, rough water between the Island and the mainland, wicked currents, tide rips. A boat was needed, and Gene had the *Skipjack*. But how—?

"Man," Gene said, "you're crazy!"

"Like a fox," Hudson said. "You know that water. I done time out there—I watched you fishing. If anybody can take a man offa that island, you can."

Gene said, "They've got a ring of buoys around the island. They've got a patrol boat inside of them. They've got machine guns on shore. They shoot at anyone caught inside those buoys, and they shoot to kill."

Hudson grinned. "Tough, eh? Maybe you don't want your kid back bad enough to risk your neck. Eh?"

Gene stared at him. "What about the walls?"

"This guy's a trusty," Hudson said. "He's got the run of the joint. You tell me where you want him and I'll see he's there. Any place on the island."

"A trusty?" Gene said. "If he's a trusty he hasn't much time to do. Why the crush-out?"

Hudson's mouth curled. "Money," he said. "What else?"

Gene was silent, thinking. Hudson waited, his shoulders against the bulkhead, his lips pursed with satisfaction.

"How do I know I get my boy back?" Gene asked.

"I'll tell you how." Hudson grinned. "Nobody wants a murder rap if they can steer around it. The way it stands now, if I fail I get a stretch for taking your kid, so long as he stays alive. And another for this crush-out. But with time off for good behavior—I'm willin' to risk that for the kind of dough I'm goin' to have. I'll be a rich man. But a murder rap—how'm I goin' to spend that dough if I get the rope?"

"If I say no, what happens?"

"Then it's all different," Hudson said. "I won't get the dough then, see? So I don't take the risk of getting caught. All I got to do is drop the kid in a lake and I'm clean. How're you goin' to prove I ever had him? How can anybody?" He picked up the child's shoe from the floor and put it back in his pocket.

Gene was silent again, staring.

Hudson looked at him, pursing his thick lips, pleased with himself. "I got yuh tight, boy. You gonna go?"

"I'll go," Gene said.

"Now you're talkin'!" Hudson said. "When?"

"It's got to be a night with fog, and lots of it. Zero-zero. And we're due for it. Maybe tomorrow night, maybe the night after. Is that too soon?"

"Just right. Where d'yuh want him?"

Gene circled the island in his mind. There was little choice. All the north shore was cliff, the east was used by the prison docks, the

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south lay under the walls of the prison. The prison farm was west of the prison. The west shore, then.

"Pike Cove," Gene said. "It's our only chance, if we've got a chance—and you'd better face that. I'll go out tomorrow and give it a look. I haven't been on that side of the island in months. But I can tell you right now it's a tough landfall, fog or no fog." Gene moved his big shoulders. "Ten to one we don't make it. What happens to Robin then?"

"They'll leave him sittin' on a curb," Hudson said. "I took the kid. It's my rap—they won't have to stand it. Something happens to us, they'll leave the kid and run. That okay?"

Gene nodded slowly. "What about the time?" he said. "You know the guards out there, the routine. Give me an hour for the run out to the island in the fog. When will we have the best chance of getting in and out?"

"Leave that to me," Hudson said. "You be ready any time after dark. Okay?" He watched Gene nod. "And listen, kid, keep it tight in your head—no cops! One wrong move from you and the kid goes in the lake. Got it?"

"I've got it."

"Atta boy," Hudson said.

He was gone then, out of the cabin, through the wheelhouse to the landing. Gene heard the sound of his feet fading. Then a car door slammed and a motor started. The motor sound faded and there was silence.

Gene put his hands up to his face. "Robin," he whispered. "Robin, lad."

His mind was full of his son—freckled face, yellow hair, button nose. If the boy was alive, there was now a chance to get him back.

He thought of the price he had to pay. Here was a crime that could destroy his life or the lives of others, and well he knew it. A convict, with only a little time to serve, who wanted to escape had to have a reason almost as great as murder, or he wouldn't risk murder. If there was any way to get Robin back without turning a man like that loose in the world, he had to find it.

He was an hour hunting that way.

And it was torment, every moment. He thought of the police. Hudson's warning could be half bluff; there might be a way to pass the word—if he wanted to risk Robin's life. But his heart said, "No police." Get Robin back unharmed first. Then the police. But Robin first.

There was the soft shuffle of moccasins on the landing.

"Gene," Petey said, "aren't you coming to supper?"

"Give me a minute, Petey. I'm cleaning up."

"It's been ready an hour. It can't get any worse."

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Gene stared at the bulkhead. Tell Petey? It would lift an enormous burden from her shoulders to know that Robin hadn't drowned. He owed her that.

Then he thought of what would follow. She'd want to know what he had to do to get Robin back; she'd stay at his heels until she found out, even though he didn't tell her. And, knowing, would she find the same answer he had—Robin first—or would she insist on calling the police? It was a risk he couldn't take.

Then another thought occurred to him, this one frightening: If she saw Hudson she would recognize him.

He was exactly the man she'd described—heavy, short, with a distinctive way of walking. Had she seen him come or go? Gene decided she hadn't. She'd been in his kitchen in the rear of the house. More, she would have come aboard and asked about him; Petey never walked around a question. She hadn't seen him, then, not yet.

Gene frowned. Hudson had to be staying somewhere near. And Petey was searching in Bayport. Somehow, he had to put a stop to that.

He left the boat and climbed the path. He found her in his kitchen beside the stove. She stood there, arms folded, watching him with large, dark eyes. Again, he felt the need to tell her that Robin was alive. This thing had worn her out. Her sweater and jeans covered a body that had lost pounds; there were shadows beneath her eyes.

But he couldn't tell her. He put a hand on the wall on either side of her, holding her in the pen of his arms.

"You've got to start eating," he said gently. 'How're you going to grow up, if you don't eat more?"

"I happen to be grown," she said.

"Call yourself grown?" he teased. "You going to quit like this?" He smiled. "You been workin' too hard," he said. "This huntin' in Bayport—I want you to quit it, Petey."

"Why?"

"Look at you," he said. "No flesh on you at all. I need your help, sure. But you won't be any help sick in bed. You've got to take some time off. A week, at least."

"Why?"

Now another thought crossed Gene's mind. He couldn't have her here in the evenings. Hudson had said, "Any time after dark." He couldn't risk Petey being around when Hudson came.

"And not only Bayport," Gene said. "Cooking for me, cleaning—leave that alone, too. Get a good week's rest. Will you do that?"

"It depends on the reason," Petey said.

"I told you the reason—you're worn out!"

Petey shook her head.

"For the luvva Mike!" Gene said. He turned away from her, sud-

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denly angry. Petey knew he was hiding something. She had sensed it or read it in his face, and now she was trying to find out what it was.

"Listen!" he said roughly. "Your pop and mom expect me to look after you. I'm going to do it whether you like it or not. I'm telling you—take a week off!"

"You're not responsible for me. I'm grown."

"So you're grown," Gene said. "So you're a grown kid that's going to get her pants whipped if you don't do what I tell you to. What d'you say to that?"

She didn't answer, but her face was a cold little piece of stone. She got her sweater from a hook beside the kitchen door. She opened the door. "You've got company coming," she said.

"Company?"

"Gale Saunders." Petey was biting the words. "She called to say she'd be out around eight. About a feature story."

"Thanks," Gene said.

Petey closed the door.

Gene turned. The clock said eight-ten. Gale was due, overdue. Gene rubbed the back of his neck with a hard hand, swearing. A feature story, pictures, publicity—it was the last thing he wanted now.

He went into the living-room and looked out the front window. In just a few minutes headlights appeared coming along the road from Riverville. They turned into his driveway. It was Riverville's one battered cab. Gale got out, paid the driver, and came up the walk. Gene opened the door.

Gale waved. "Hi, Skipper."

He let her in. "Coffee out here," he said and took her through to the kitchen. The only way he knew to stop Gale from writing the feature story was to sell her a lie. Selling a lie as big as the one he had in mind, to a woman as smart as Gale, was going to be a man-size piece of work. He offered to take her coat. She shook her head.

"I got chilled coming out," she said. "It's really cold. It feels like fog weather."

"Get a lot of it this time of year," Gene said. He set a place for her at the table, poured coffee. "Petey said you wanted to talk about that feature story."

"I've got an okay on it," Gale said. "I can't promise anything, of course. But I think—"

"Let's let it slide," Gene said.

"Have you heard something?"

"Not a word."

"Then why?"

Gene looked down at his coffee cup. "It's a lot of work," he said. "You've done enough."

"Don't be silly," Gale said. "I want to do anything, everything I can. You know that. It isn't—" Her voice faded; she looked at him sharply. "Skipper, you're holding out on me. What changed your mind?"

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"I found another shoe," Gene said. "Down the river a way. That's all—just a shoe."

Gale looked at him steadily. "So?"

"That's it, I guess."

"You said they threw one in. Why not two?"

Gene shook his head. "Gale, I hate it—you know that. But there's a limit to how long a man can kid himself. I've held out longer than most men would. Now I've got to face it."

"Did you give the shoe to the police?"

"No. They know what happened. They're satisfied. And I don't want any more fuss. I want to forget it, all of it."

"What about Petey. Does she know?"

"She's in no shape to take it now," Gene said. "In a month or two, maybe, but not now."

Gale looked at him across the table. He was a big guy, rough and powerful, with a pair of the cleanest eyes in the world. They were eyes you could trust. Why? Because they couldn't hide a lie.

"No," she said. "I won't buy it."

"You won't buy what?"

"This yarn you're telling me," Gale said. "Maybe you found a shoe, maybe not. But this I know: you don't honestly believe Robin's dead."

He said, "But I do."

He was scowling at her. His big hands had become fists on the table. Gale's heart ached. This lie, this badly told and awkward lie, was important to him, and yet she had to get the truth.

She left her chair and went around the table. He waited stiffly, still scowling. She put a hand on either side of his face and brought her lips to his and kissed him. Her heart was in that kiss. Then, still holding his face, she met his eyes.

"That's how I feel," she said. "If you didn't know before, you do now. Would I do anything to harm you or Robin?"

He looked at her, startled and remembering. "Listen, Gale—"

"No, you listen," she said. "I'm a country girl, sure. But I've been in the big town. I know how crime works and how the laws works. I can help you, if you'll let me."

"I don't need any help," he said stubbornly.

"You do," she said. "You're going to need all the help there is to get Robin back alive."

"I told you—"

"Lies!" she said. "Because the people who took your boy warned you to keep your mouth shut—why else? If you'd stop and think a minute you'd realize how obvious it is. Besides, you can't lie worth a cent. It shows all over your face." She shook his head gently with her hands. "Gene, let me in!"

He looked at her a long moment, but when he spoke his voice was flat and final. "It's like I told you," he said.

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Gale dropped her hands and turned away. "What do you have to do to get him back?" she asked. "What's it going to cost you? Prison? The rope?"

Gene didn't answer.

"How do you know the boy's still alive?" Gale asked. "How do you know they'll give him back when you do whatever it is you have to do? You don't, Gene. You're going into this blindly, not knowing anything, really. Your life, Robin's life—they're at stake. It's too big for you alone. If you won't talk to me, at least talk to the police."

Gene got up slowly. His face was taut and pale; his mouth was thin. He came toward her. He reached out with his big hands and took her arms. His fingers were like clamps of steel. Softly he said, "The boy drowned, Gale."

"No, Gene, no!"

"The river got him, Gale. You're wrong about all this. It's done, finished. You've *got* to believe that. You've got to forget you ever thought anything else."

"Gene, please!"

His hands were closing, hurting more. "I've thought it all out. And this is the answer: the river got my boy, Gale. Can't you understand what I'm telling you?"

"Yes—yes, I understand!" Gale twisted in his grasp. "Let me go, Gene. You're hurting me!"

He didn't let go. "Are you *sure* you understand?"

"You don't want me to do anything," Gale said. "Or tell anybody. And I won't. I promise you I won't—not until you've had time to think. I'll come out again tomorrow. Then we'll see. Whatever I do, I'll tell you first. I promise!"

He let her go. "I'll call a cab."

"It's not too far," Gale said. "I need the walk."

Gene stood still in the center of the room after she'd gone. He'd done all he could, the best way he could, hating every bit of it. He'd felt all the pain he'd caused Gale. And little good he'd done. She knew. All he'd gained, if he'd gained anything at all, was a little time.

Petey Linn awakened early the next morning. She was standing at her bedroom window when the *Skipjack* went downriver, feeling a careful way through the fog. Gene usually waved at her window, knowing she would be there. But not this morning.

Petey turned from the window, biting her lips, blinking eyes that stung. She'd needed that greeting badly after the night she'd been through. A long night full of hurt and hopelessness, full of tears.

"Stupid," she'd told herself a dozen times. "Feeling sorry for yourself won't help. Blubbering won't help." And now she was clouding up again. Suddenly furious with herself, she left the bedroom and went downstairs.

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"Mom," she said, "I want my money out of the bank."

Mary Linn turned slowly away from the kitchen range. The tone of Petey's voice had startled her. There'd been tears in it, but on top of the tears there'd been an almost yelling anger.

Petey was standing in the doorway, small in sweater and jeans, her hands clenched. Her eyes were red, but her chin was hard and determined. Mary Linn hadn't seen fight like this in Petey for a long time.

"Well," she said, "it's your money."

Jake Linn looked at his daughter over his glasses, holding the morning paper aside. He was a hard, square-faced man, with a gleam of warm laughter deep in his blue eyes. He pretended only a casual interest. "Might a man ask why you want your money?"

"For clothes," Petey said. "Dresses."

Jake Linn's brows went up. "Petey," he said, "after all these years you ain't tellin' me you're a girl? I figured on breakin' you in as a deck hand."

"Jake Linn!" his wife snapped. "That'll be enough!"

"Yes, ma'am," Jake said. He lifted the paper, then held a corner of it aside to look at Petey. "Sissy," he said.

Petey glared at her father.

Her mother said, "You'll have dresses. Dress-up dresses, and more than one. A good coat, shoes—everything. But not with your money." Mary Linn looked at her husband. "Jake! Come out from behind that paper." Jake obeyed slowly, his face wearing an exaggerated look of pain. "This is a rainy day, Mr. Linn," May said. "Get your check book and start writing."

Petey cashed her check in Riverville. She was waiting at the terminal for the bus to Bayport when she saw the Riverville taxi drop a passenger in front of the Morrison Hotel. The cab came on to park near Petey. The driver, Hack Williams, had gone to high school with Petey. He gave her a wide grin and opened the cab door.

"I'm goin' to Bayport," he said. "Want a free ride?"

Petey said, "I might as well."

She wondered at Hack's generosity, but not for long. He was bursting with gossip. Gene Torsen was doing all right for himself. Gale Saunders was back in town and the way she was acting—man, that old fire hadn't anywhere near gone out! Hack had taken her out to Torsen's last night and again this morning. No Gene this morning, though. The way Gale had taken that bad news, you'd have thought she'd been stood up at her wedding. Hack wagged his head, clucking with admiration.

"If I was Gene," he said, "I'd never go fishing."

Petey said, "I'm not interested."

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And that, she thought, was probably the biggest lie she'd ever told.

Presently they were rolling into the outskirts of Bayport, passing stores where Petey had imitated a sore-footed walk for the clerks. "He puts his feet down like they hurt," she said. "A heavy-set man, not very tall. If you see him, I'd appreciate a call."

Every store in town. Twice, she'd wasted hours waiting for a man with that kind of walk, only to find it was the wrong man. None of that today. Today she had to somehow turn a scrawny kid into a woman as beautiful as Gale Saunders, and that, she knew, would be no small job.

She called her home at noon to ask an opinion of her mother. The opinion given, her mother said, "A man called from George's Market. He'd like to see you. It's about the man you were hunting."

Petey said, "Gene told me to stop hunting."

"Oh. Then perhaps you'd better."

"It was a silly business, anyway," Petey said.

But silly or not, she found she could not forget it. It stayed with her through all her shopping, like a mouse nibbling at the edge of her conscience.

At two o'clock she climbed the hill away from the business district. "Nothing else to do," she told herself. "I might as well."

George's Market was a one-man store, as old and as shabby as the neighborhood it served. "Came in yesterday, a little later than this," the red-faced owner said. "Got to thinking about it this morning and decided I'd better call you. Could be your man. Anyway, it's a chance."

"I'll wait a while," Petey said.

She sat on a box at the rear of the store where she could see and not be seen, huddled there, her hands thrust into the pockets of her jeans. People came and went, dozens of them, bundled against the chill of the gray afternoon.

Petey watched them all, wondering what Gene would say if he could see her now. She knew a feeling of guilt. This was the first time she'd ever clearly disobeyed him.

"Heads up," the grocer said. "Here he is."

A man was walking past the store window, thick-set and heavily built. He wore a brown coat and a loud shirt and he seemed to have a limp.

A cold shiver touched Petey's spine. She was sure and then not sure a dozen times before he came through the door. He crossed to the meat counter. His walk—that rolling, sore-footed walk—rang alarm bells in her memory.

"It's him," Petey whispered. "It is!"

Ed Kennedy, Riverville's constable, could not be hurried. He was a one-speed man, tall and lanky

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and relaxed. Riverville people joked about the way he dressed—blue denim shirt, sporty tie, a suit coat, and a badge clipped to his suspenders—but they didn't joke about the job he did. "Scared of nothing and nobody," was what they said of him.

"I can't get over you seein' the guy," Ed said.

Petey said, "I couldn't forget that walk."

She sat beside Ed in the front seat of his old car, shoulders hunched forward as if she was trying to hurry them into Bayport. Ed wished there was some way he could get her braced for disappointment. She'd come storming into his office in Riverville, a half hour ago, pale, big-eyed, excited, and scared half to death. Found the man who'd taken the Torsen boy, she'd said. Followed him to where he lived in Bayport.

What she wanted Ed to do was take her to Bayport, get Robin, and bring him back. Just like that. She wouldn't listen to reason. All he could do was take her in and let her see for herself how wrong she was.

"How come you didn't call Gene?" he asked.

"I did. He wasn't home."

The closer he got to Bayport, the less he cared about barging in on strangers with a deal like this. But he'd said he would, like it or not. He turned east in the center of town, pointed his car up the hill through a thin, afternoon fog.

"There," Petey said suddenly. "That's the house."

Ed Kennedy put his car alongside the curb. The place wasn't much, shabby and beat up, the blinds down tight. But chimney smoke said someone was home.

"You sure you ain't made a mistake?" Ed asked.

Petey said, "I'd know him anywhere. I told you that."

"Okay," Ed said.

He got a revolver out of the dashboard compartment, checked it, and dropped it into his coat pocket. They got out of the car and went up the walk together.

Petey was scared, if the white, pinched look on her face meant anything, but she didn't lag behind. Ed gave her arm a reassuring squeeze and punched the bell.

"Petey, you let me do the talking," he said.

Petey nodded as the lock clicked and the door opened. A man looked out at them, a beefy man who wore a gaudy shirt. He was a couple of inches shorter than Kennedy, but considerably wider. His lips were bruised and swollen.

"Something I can do for you?"

Ed said, "Yes. I got a favor to ask."

He pulled his coat lapel back to give the man a look at his badge. Petey swallowed hard. She heard Ed explain who he was and why they'd come. The man in the gaudy shirt nodded.

"Come on in," he said.

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They followed him into a living-room that was small and hot and cluttered. A woman stood near a closed inner door, her hands clasped at her waist. The fall of light from a table lamp left the upper half of her face in shadow. Petey wished she could see her eyes.

"I'm Hudson," the man said. "This is Ella, my missus."

Ed said, "I'm Kennedy, ma'am. This is Petey Linn."

"Kennedy's a cop," Hudson told the woman. "He wants to ask about some kid that's missing."

"Petey here thinks he was taken," Ed said.

He told them how Robin had disappeared after Petey had seen a man and a woman on the landing; how she'd hunted the man ever since, sure she'd know his odd walk anywhere. "Today she figures she found him," he said. "She followed you home from the store on account of you walk like your feet hurt."

"They sure do, sis." Hudson grinned at Petey. "Bunions on both of 'em."

Ed said, "She thinks you were fishing on the landing."

"I never been fishing in my life," Hudson said. "It wasn't me and the wife you saw. You drove up here for nothin'."

"If you'll let us look around—" Ed began.

Hudson waved a big hand. "I'd sure like to," he said, "but you know how a woman is about showin' a house that's not right clean. Ella's kind of let things slide, not feelin' so good lately. The place's pretty much a mess. I got a better idea."

He bent to open the door of a built-in buffet and lifted a full bottle of whiskey to the light. "How about a little of this eight-year-old?" he said. "You're off duty, and all."

"Not exactly," Ed said. "I—"

"Drivin' all the way up here for nothin', you got a drink comin'." Hudson was working at the cap. He looked at Petey. "Ain't that right, sis? You can see we're not the kind to go around grabbin' kids. You're satisfied, ain't yuh?"

Petey didn't answer him.

Ed Kennedy looked at her. She was staring at the floor, her hands clenched. She was leaving it to him, which was right and proper. Ed decided Petey should have her look around.

"A messed-up house don't matter to us," he said.

Petey's hand tightened on his arm. Her head had come up suddenly. He heard what she had heard: a soft thudding from the room beyond the door back of the woman. He saw Hudson's mouth go flat, heard him swear.

"Robin!" Petey yelled. "Petey's here!"

A small voice answered her: "Petey . . . Petey!"

Ed Kennedy didn't move. He

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knew his mouth was open. That voice was a kid's voice, sure enough. He had heard Petey and answered her. That was Gene Torsen's boy behind that door, sure as shootin'. Hadn't drowned, after all. Gene had been right all the time, so had Petey. Ed stiffened then. Hudson was coming at him, the bottle lifted.

"Hold that!" Ed said.

Hudson kept coming.

Ed Kennedy knew this was real trouble. He gave Petey a shove that sent her flying and reached for the gun in his coat pocket. He bumbled, getting hold of it, and then the sight caught on the lining of his coat. He jerked at the gun, swearing, while Hudson swung the bottle.

And Petey screamed.

Crouching against the wall where Ed's push had sent her, she saw Hudson lunge at Ed, swinging the bottle like a club. She saw it strike, heard it strike. She had never seen death, until now. But she knew Ed Kennedy was dead. The man with the swollen mouth had killed him.

(continued on page 70)

A Reader-Service Directory—
CURRENT MYSTERY & SUSPENSE HARDCOVERS

AUTHOR	TITLE	PUBLISHER	RETAIL PRICE	ON SALE DATE
Asho, Gordon	THE MAN WHO LAUGHED AT MURDER	Doubleday	$2.95	April 7
Creasy, John	DEATH OF AN ASSASSIN	Charles Scribner's Sons	2.95	April 5
Curtiss, Ursula	SO DIES THE DREAMER	Dodd, Mead	2.95	April 25
Daly, Elizabeth	AN ELIZABETH DALY MYSTERY OMNIBUS: THREE HENRY GAMADGE NOVELS	Rinehart	4.50	April 28
Dewey, Thomas B.	THE GIRL WHO WASN'T THERE	Simon and Schuster	2.95	April 8
Fletcher, Lucille	BLINDFOLD	Random House	2.95	April 13
Gair, Malcolm	THE SCHULTZ MONEY	Doubleday	2.95	April 21
Garve, Andrew	THE GOLDEN DEED	Harper & Brothers	2.95	April 13
Howard, James A.	MURDER IN MIND	E. P. Dutton	2.95	April 11
Kendrick, Baynard	THE ALUMINUM TURTLE	Dodd, Mead	2.95	April 4
Marric, J. J.	GIDEON'S RISK	Harper & Brothers	2.95	April 27
Matheson, Hugh	THE THIRD FORCE	Ives Washburn	2.95	April 20
Miller, Marc	ROOM, BOARD AND DEATH	Arcadia House	2.95	April 1
Shenkin, Elizabeth	MIDSUMMER'S NIGHTMARE	Rinehart	2.95	April 4
Story, Jack Trevor	MIX ME A PERSON	Macmillan	2.95	April 11
Stout, Rex	THREE AT WOLFE'S DOOR	Viking Press	2.95	April 6
Van Dine, S. S.	THE "CANARY" MURDER CASE (Reissue)	Charles Scribner's Sons	3.50	April 29
Williams, Brad	A BORDERLINE CASE	Mill-Morrow	2.95	April 6

Available wherever books are sold. Do not order through this magazine.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **RICK RUBIN**

TITLE: ***The Man Who Hated Editors***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: Portland, Oregon

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *The wry tale of an unsuccessful writer, and how he struggled to make the grade, finally devising a scheme that your Editors found too horrible even to contemplate!*

HERE IS WHAT ACTUALLY HAPpened, so help me . . . For three long years those New York editors returned every story I wrote. Three long, bitter years and a basket full of rejection slips.

It all started because I didn't think much of some of the stories they published. Take yourself. I'll bet you've been reading a magazine, and often said to yourself: "Why, I could write better stories than these!"

Well, that's what I said. So three years ago I decided to do something about it. After work, on week-ends, whenever I got the chance, I started writing stories.

I don't know what kind of stories you like, but I've always got a special kick out of crimes and mystery yarns. You might say that I had a suppressed desire to knock off a lot of people who bothered me, and by reading the mystery magazines I could picture myself doing it and get my kicks. Strictly vicarious, of course—strictly a safety valve.

I'm not so hot on detective stories—they're usually too complicated and tricky. I just like to read about what motivates a guy to commit a crime, and what happens after he does. And I don't particularly care if he gets caught. I don't mind him getting caught sometimes—say, if I didn't like him in the first place—but I'd just as soon read about somebody I like doing the dirty deed, for a good and sufficient reason, and then getting away free as dandelion fluff.

That's the kind of story I like, so that's the kind I wrote. And I tell you, I wrote a mess of stories in those 36 months. It's a good thing I

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wasn't married, because my wife would have been as lonely as a widow all that time, with me hunched over the typewriter every free minute, pounding out story after story. It cut down plenty on my beer, baseball, and bowling too.

I wrote one story about a guy drowning another guy in a swimming pool. I wrote one where a guy tried to run another guy off the road in a car, only they'd filed his steering gear almost through and he went off the road himself. I killed them with knives and I killed them with guns. With poison, axe, arrow, sword, noose—you name it, I used it. Fear and "accidents" and weak hearts—just about every *modus operandi* (you see I know the lingo by now!)

Of course, I didn't always write about murders—but I liked murder stories best. When I finished a story about a robbery or a kidnaping I wouldn't feel really satisfied—not deep inside. It wouldn't seem important enough to me, the emotions wouldn't have been—well, shocking enough. So I concentrated and specialized on murders.

Well, you ought to see the pile of rejection slips I got for all my love's labor lost. I've never really counted them, but I bet there were hundreds. At first I got the usual printed slips: "We regret that the enclosed story is not suitable for our needs. Do not consider this a reflection on the quality of your work. Please try us again when you have another story you think suitable for us." Each magazine had its own way of saying it, but they all meant the same thing. N—o——no.

And yet even those early stories of mine were better than the tripe they printed in their slick-covered magazines. Not better than all of them—I'm not that conceited—but better than most of the lame-brain stories they ran. Stuff the publisher's nephew wrote, I suppose, or from some guy the editor met in a bar who sold it to him while he was feeling no pain. Fat chance a guy like me had—way out here in Oregon, 3,000 miles from New York City. *I* didn't know any editors. *I* couldn't butter them up, talk them into buying *my* yarns. So they'd keep on sending me their form rejection slips, and keep on buying hogwash from some guy who lived there in New York and had an "in" with them.

About a year and a half after I started writing, I began to get better rejection slips. Sometimes an editor would write a little note on the bottom of the slip—'Sorry" or "Not bad, but not for us". At first that made me feel pretty good, but after a while I saw that it didn't mean a thing. They were just writing those sops to string me along. "Sorry." That was a laugh! Fat lot they were sorry.

Every once in a blue moon they'd even praise one of my stories. "A well written piece of work, with a good plot, but . . ." Always that

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big "but." Or "however." Or "unfortunately." And then some damned silly excuse why they weren't accepting it. Their inventory was overloaded. Or it didn't quite fit their wave length. Always one phony excuse or another.

I'll tell you, I got fed up—to here. Three long years and not a single sale—and me pounding out stories that were twice as good as some of the stuff they were paying high prices for.

The way I'd send them was this. I had a list of the six best fiction magazines in the crime and mystery field. You've probably read one or another of them. *Emory Quinn's Mystery Magazine; Albert Pitchfork's* ditto, *Mantrap, Crime Digest, The Sinner Mystery Magazine,* and *Mac Haynes* ditto. As soon as I finished a story I'd send it to whichever one I didn't already have a story out to. I'd do it up first-class, cleanly typed on bond paper with a stamped return envelope enclosed. When the first magazine sent it back, I'd mail it to the second, and then the third, and so on till I'd sent it to all six magazines. After that there wasn't anything to do but put the story away. But, before I did that I'd read it again, thinking about those fathead editors in New York and wondering what it was they really wanted.

Finally, I wrote the best story I'd ever written. I called it *Murder by Moonlight,* and it had everything. Talk about suspense! There was this beautiful girl, running around with her blouse half torn off, being chased by this paranoiac gangster. There was an average citizen who got mixed up in it without knowing what it was all about, and some sexy high school kids, and a tough taxi driver who battled the gunman. It built up something terrific, to a sensational climax, with a real twist ending that had you hanging by your thumbs.

If they don't take this one, I said to myself, then the whole business was rigged. But deep inside of me I hadn't any faith left. I really hated those smug and arrogant editors. I wished that just once I could meet one of them face to face. Brother, would I tear him apart! I'd make the violence in my own stories seem tame.

So I got to brooding about it. Here was *Murder by Moonlight,* far and away the best thing I'd ever written, and I was about to send it out to the same six magazines and receive the same six rejection slips. What was the use? I knew they wouldn't buy it. They'd slide it into the return envelope with one of their infuriating little rejection slips and send it back to me. Maybe they'd keep it a week, or maybe they'd keep it three or four months (as often happened), but in the end it would be the same old runaround.

It really began to get me. Being rejected had got me down all along, but suddenly I pictured those fat

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and fatuous editors, sitting in their plush offices and smirking as they sent my story back—and the picture really got under my skin.

I felt I had to do *something* to get even with them.

I started thinking about getting my revenge as if I were planning a new story. After all those months of practice I could think of a million ways of getting even with enemies, and that's what they were—my enemies.

Of course I had to do it in some way that wouldn't incriminate me. And I had to be sure I didn't hurt an editor if he should by some miracle decide to buy *Murder by Moonlight*. It had to be something that would hurt him only if he rejected the story.

When I came up with the idea I jumped around shouting and laughing and dancing. It looked perfect, and it was absolutely foolproof. I figured if I just used a little care right at the beginning I'd be completely in the clear—and the beauty of it was that even if they figured it out, they'd never be able to pin it on me.

I set right to work. I knew a guy who could get me the stuff I needed without attracting any attention—an old buddy whom I knew I could trust to keep a secret. Besides, he'd never even hear about what happened, and if he did he'd never connect it with me anyway. I hadn't told anyone about me trying to become a writer, figuring to surprise my friends after I'd sold my first story. Which figured to be a couple of centuries from now at least.

When I had everything ready I dropped the manuscript in the mail to *Emory Quinn's Mystery Magazine*. For the first week I didn't think of it much, but then I started to watch the papers. I didn't really think they'd cover it out here in Portland, but you never could tell.

Murder by Moonlight came back in two weeks with a little handwritten note signed by the editor telling me how sorry he was he couldn't buy it. I bet you're even sorrier now, I laughed to myself, or would be if you knew.

I then sent it off to *Albert Pitchfork's Mystery Magazine*. This time it was back in three weeks. Another note, another name scratched off my list. There still wasn't anything in the Portland papers about what was happening in New York City, but I didn't really care.

Next to *Mantrap*. A month's wait and back it came again, but with only a form rejection slip. Oh well, I thought, you can't get them all. But five weeks later I received another handwritten note, this one from *Crime Digest*.

Out it went again—to *The Sinner Mystery Magazine*. I was getting near the end of the list. *The Sinner* is even slower than the others, but that didn't bother me. In fact, their slowness might be good for me. It would throw the police

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off the track, make them think the literary crime wave in New York was over.

But I got it back from *The Sinner* a lot faster than I'd expected. Then I went over to my writing desk and got ready to whip it out to *Mac Haynes Mystery Magazine,* the last one on my list.

Unexpectedly there was a knock on the door.

When I answered it there were about fifteen cops in the hall, half of them in uniform, half in plain clothes. I was surprised, partly at their being cops and partly at there being so many of them. In mysteries there'd never been more than one or two cops when they went to pick up a guy. I guess in Portland the cops like to travel in bunches.

Of course I tried to stall them, and I acted surprised when they found the stuff; but they had me dead to rights, and they took me right down and booked me.

The detective told me that I'd killed three editors and one secretary. He said they'd played it up big in the New York City papers. The secretary was at *Mantrap,* where I only got a printed rejection slip. Since the editor hadn't written me a note, I hadn't got a fair shot at him.

Naturally I pleaded innocent, but they had me cold. The manuscript, the preaddressed return envelope from *The Sinner,* the one I was preparing for *Mac Haynes Mystery Magazine,* the little bottle of cyanide mixed with glue, and the brush I had used to spread it on the gummed flap of the return envelope —all were right there on the table when the cops busted in. That was plenty of evidence for any jury.

I'd sure thought I had them stymied without a clue, since they always sent back the return envelope after licking the poisonous little flap. But it turned out that the magazines kept a list of the stories they'd rejected, with dates of rejection. So when they discovered that I'd been the only one who had been rejected by each editor and the secretary on the same day the four of them were poisoned, they put six and seven together and got thirteen.

Then all they had to do was wait for my next submission, check the glue on the envelope, reject the story without licking the flap, and rush it back to me—or rather to the Portland cops, who planted it in my mailbox, waited for me to get the evidence out of them, and then swoop down on me.

At least I got one of my stories printed finally. With all this publicity they didn't even think of rejecting it. I'll bet I could have written pure gibberish and they'd still have published it!

Published *Murder by Moonlight?* Hell, no! They published this story you're reading now, that I wrote in death row.

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Another clever and witty parody-pastiche of The Master (in this instance, Mr. Schlock Homes) and his chronic chronicler (in this instance, Dr. Watney)... with even more delicious puns and canonical allusions, and with, again, remarkable fidelity to the "classical" form . . . gorgeous spoofing!

THE ADVENTURE OF THE PRINTER'S INC.

by ROBERT L. FISH

THE SUMMER OF '58 HAD BEEN A rather quiet one. My friend, Mr. Schlock Homes, had returned from the continent, where his success in disbanding a group of political fanatics given to ritual orgies had earned him the gratitude of both the British and Polish governments, as well as the plaudits of the press on both sides of the channel—a case I have already chronicled in The Adventure of the Danzig Men.

Since his return there had been but several minor cases. For example, he had been able to uncover the defalcations of Lord Carstairs, with the result that the gentleman was forced to resign from all six of his exclusive clubs—a case I find detailed in my notes under the title of The Adventure of the Dismembered Peer. There had also been other inquiries of lesser interest, but in general it had been a period of relative inactivity for Homes.

One evening in September we were returning home after dining in a small restaurant near our rooms at 221B Bagel Street. Our landlady, Mrs. Essex, had gone to visit a sick sister in Sussex, and our page was enjoying holidays, so that we found ourselves unattended for the first time in many years, and living a bachelor's existence. To take any messages during our absence, we had left a small lad named Finster Ismir, one of the street arabs whom Homes employed from time to time for minor errands. As we arrived at our entrance, Homes greeted him cordially.

"And how are the Bagel Street Irregulars?" he queried, smiling at the urchin.

"Oh, sir," replied the lad, "since Dr. Watney has been treating us, we are all quite regular once again."

Homes glanced at me approvingly and turned to enter the doorway when the street arab said, "Begging your pardon, sir, but during your absence you had a visitor. He was a man of middle-age, well dressed, and he awaited your arrival in your rooms for over an hour. He has but recently left, hav-

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ing promised to return within a few minutes with a problem which he claims to be quite urgent."

Homes clapped the boy on the shoulder and after thanking him for his services, we mounted the steps to our rooms.

"Until our mysterious visitor returns," remarked Homes as we entered, "let us see what we can deduce from the evidence he must have left during his stay."

I glanced about the room and said, "Really, Homes! I fail to see any change since we left."

"It is not that you fail to see, Watney," replied my friend, "but that you fail to observe. For example, here are the remains of a cigar with no toothmarks on the end; nor is it damply matted, as is usual. Our visitor must therefore be a man without teeth, and with very dry lips, a sign as you must know from your medical experience, of incipient diabetes. Unfortunately, we have no time for further deduction, for here, unless I am mistaken, is our mysterious client."

The door opened to admit a large, bustling individual, who immediately pumped Homes's hand vigorously, and seating himself before us, fitted a cigar neatly into a holder and began to speak.

"Mr. Homes," he said, "I am being persecuted, and I am desperately in need of your help. My name is George Good, and I am—"

"You are a bookmaker," interrupted Homes smoothly. "Note the callus on the inside of the index finger of the right hand, Watney; it comes from holding the needle when sewing the binding in place. Note also the spot of yellow glue on the cuff; it is a sure indication of the trade. And when we are able to observe the hilt of a knife protruding from Mr. Good's pocket, a knife certainly employed for the cutting of pages, we can definitely conclude that Mr. Good is a bookmaker."

"You amaze me, Mr. Homes," said our visitor in awe. "I am indeed a bookmaker, and in the course of writing the many betting slips each day, I have developed this callus which you so cleverly noted. I carry the knife for protection, for mine is not the most peaceful of occupations. I apologize for the egg stain, but in all honesty, I have been so disturbed lately that I scarcely know what I am doing, let alone what I am wearing."

"Tell us your problem," said Homes. "At the moment I am between cases and can devote my full attention to it."

"Well, Mr. Homes," said the large man, leaning forward in his chair, "as I have stated, my name is George Good and I operate a small book which is known throughout the trade as the Good Book. While it is not the largest of its kind, I have been able through the years to develop a modest reputation, and my income from this endeavour is both steady and satisfactory.

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"As you must know, in my profession there are many dishonest people, and I pride myself that I have been able to place myself on the same footing of respectability as my friends Job Abrams and Amos Fortistan in keeping bookmaking a decent profession.

"I am here for the sake of these two friends as well as for myself, because to-day we are all being threatened. Of late, Mr. Homes, the dock area of London—which is where we all operate for the most part—has been flooded with leaflets of this nature." And he took three papers from his pocket and handed them to Homes.

I leaned over my friend's shoulder and we both perused them. The first read:

THE GOOD BOOK SAYS:
Gambling Is A Deadly Sin!
Hear Professor Martin Expound
On The Evils Of Gambling.
Place: Johnson's Warehouse—
Time: Every Night At 9 O'Clock.
Directly After The Lecture There
Will Be A
DEMONSTRATION

The other leaflets were quite similar, except that one began: *THE BOOK OF JOB SAYS*, while the third began: *THE BOOK OF AMOS SAYS.*

"Now, Mr. Homes," said our visitor earnestly, "you must believe me when I swear to you that I never said anything of the sort. Nor did my friends Job or Amos. You must realize that a canard of this type can be ruinous to our profession." The sincerity of his voice left no room for doubt but that he was telling the exact truth. "My friends and I are prepared to pay any reasonable amount to have you trace this to its source and stop these fiends from jeopardizing our livelihood!"

Homes studied the leaflets with keen interest. There was a shadow of a frown in his eyes which indicated to me that there was something of a puzzling nature in the message which for the moment he could not fathom.

"Tell me, Mr. Good," said he, finally, "have you any enemies?"

"Well, Mr. Homes" replied the bookmaker, "you must understand that in my business, as in all businesses, there are occasional dissatisfied clients. It is true that I have been the object of several armed attacks, and I was once thrown from a Thames river-boat after having been handcuffed and gagged, an occasion when I considered myself fortunate to have escaped with only a dipping. At one time I also admit to having discovered an infernal machine attached to the brake-pedal of my hansom, but since I seldom apply the brake I was saved from any unpleasant accident. However, an enemy in the sense of one who would deliberately threaten a man's livelihood is difficult to imagine."

"Well, Mr. Good," said Homes, after considering this information,

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"if you will leave these interesting leaflets in my hands I shall get to work on it at once. Please give your address to Dr. Watney here, and you may expect to hear from me within a very few days."

For some moments after our visitor had taken his leave, Homes remained in a brown study, the offending papers held tautly in his tapering fingers. Finally he sighed heavily and arose.

"It is best to strike while the iron is hot, Watney," said he. "I suggest that we attend to-night's lecture and see what we can learn. In a way it is a pity, as Crippin is singing tonight at Bow Street, and I had hoped we might attend. However, business before pleasure, so if you will excuse me for a few moments while I hurry into suitable vestments, we shall be on our way!"

In a few minutes we were rattling along Old Holborn on our way to Limehouse. Homes, a veritable master of disguise, was dressed as a retired brewmaster and was busily chewing on a small cake of yeast.

"Authenticity, Watney," he exclaimed, "Authenticity! It is the secret of all successful disguise. But here we are in Limehouse. It is many years since I made my first visit to this quaint section of our great city, but I see it has changed but little."

We descended before a large warehouse, brilliantly illuminated by gas-lamps, and made our way inside. We had apparently arrived too late for the lecture, for as we entered we could hear the fading sound of applause, and we were in time to notice a large man in the act of descending from the platform which had been raised at one end of the room.

He was a startling figure, fully seven feet in height, and weighing no less than twenty stone. His hair was of a deep orange shade, and as he descended the steps leading from the dais, I noted that he limped badly.

At sight of this strange figure, Homes gave a sharp cry, and grasping my arm with a grip of iron, drew me back into the shadows along the wall.

"Watney!" he exclaimed, his voice tense with excitement. "That is certainly not a person named Martin! That is the most dangerous man in London! It is Professor Marty, the one they call, and with good reason, the Butcher!"

"But Homes," I cried, "are you sure?"

"Watney, I never forget a face! You may recall that he was the master criminal who forged the papers in that quadruple paternity case of last year—the one which you so aptly chronicled in The Scion of the Four. I tell you it is Professor Marty himself! This case is becoming far more complex than I had originally contemplated. We must keep our eye peeled, for the Professor is the cleverest criminal outside of prison to-day!"

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Keeping well back into the shadows, we slowly circled the huge hall. Throughout its length, large tables covered with baize had been placed, and on one side of these tables men were busy shuffling cards, and awaiting the audience to arrange themselves about the tables to begin the play. The appointments of the hall were no less than luxurious; thick draperies of expensive silks hid the walls, while soft music came from an alcove where a small ensemble played quietly. I assumed that this was the demonstration mentioned in the leaflets, and said as much to Homes.

"It is probably much more of a demonstration than you imagine," was his strange reply. "Let us watch the play with care, for this is obviously a major operation on the part of Professor Marty. Note the draperies and the orchestra. Note the mahogany tables and the new green baize. Consider the enormous size of the organization which is needed to handle the demonstration at all of the many tables."

"Not only that, Homes," I answered. "Note also that all the bank-notes in use are new. The cashiers in the corner are changing everyone's money for new bills, and only new bills are allowed in play!"

"It is all part of the decor of luxury, Watney. The Professor does nothing on a small scale, and the use of new money is in keeping with the general beauty and esthetics of his establishment here. Keep watching with the utmost care, for there must be an explanation for this extravagance on the part of one who values money above life itself! And make no mistake, Watney—this has cost the Professor a fortune. I find it difficult to believe that he has done all this simply for the purpose of embarrassing a small group of bookmakers!"

The play at the various tables was by now quite active, and the hum of voices, together with the calls of the dealers, arose until there was a steady level of sound which was quite loud. Suddenly I was sure that I had the answer.

"Homes! I've got it!" I cried. "This is nothing but a gambling house, and the leaflets were simply the means of enticing victims to this place. Let us call the authorities at once and have them take action!"

Homes shook his head sadly. "I wish it were that simple," said he; "but you vastly underestimate the fiendish cleverness of Professor Marty. During our stay here I have been observing the card-play with exceptional care, and I have noted something which you evidently did not. *Each card in use is marked in such a manner that the dealer knows precisely the value of his opponent's hand.* No; Professor Marty has made sure that nobody can bring a charge of gambling against him, for he has eliminated

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the element of risk from the play!"

We remained silent, contemplating the immense intelligence of the man against whom we were pitted. At last Homes sighed heavily. "I fear there is little more to be learned from this visit, Watney," he said. "The answer must lie in those leaflets which Mr. Good has left in our possession. I suggest we return to our rooms, for I feel a comfortable chair and a few bars of Rubinoff will do more in aiding me arrive at a solution to this problem than any further inquiry we might make here."

Once again in Bagel Street, Homes quickly changed to his dressing-gown and bid me good night. "I shall stay up a bit more, if you do not mind, Watney," said he. "All problems are of interest to me, but any business involving Professor Marty is of particular interest. If you would not mind, please hand me those leaflets from the table before retiring, and I shall get down to it!"

The following morning I entered our sitting-room to find the lamps still burning and Homes dozing in a chair, his hand still clutching the three sheets of paper. At my entrance he awoke, instantly alert, and arose to greet me.

"I believe I have come to the proper solution, Watney," said he, smilingly genially. "I suggest that we repair to the restaurant on the corner and enjoy a hearty breakfast, during which I shall explain my theory to you and ask your reactions."

We were soon seated across from one another in a corner booth in the restaurant, and the waiter had taken our order. Homes leaned back comfortably, and reaching into his pocket produced the three leaflets and placed them on the table before me.

"Do you note anything out of the ordinary about these pages, Watney?" he asked. "You do not? Well, when first I saw them, it struck me that there was something missing, but at the moment I was unable to place my finger upon it. It was only last night upon our return from Johnson's Warehouse, when I had an opportunity to spend more time in the study of these documents, that I realized what it was.

"You have undoubtedly seen many leaflets in your time, Watney, as have we all, and there is always one mark on every leaflet—or any printed matter, as far as that goes—which we see but do not observe, since we see it but subconsciously. That is the seal of the Printer's Guild at the bottom of the sheet. It is always there; every folder announcing the sale of used traps, every journal which appears daily at our breakfast table, every concert announcement posted on a wall—they all have imprinted at the bottom of the page the small oval of the Guild. It is so obviously and

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everlastingly there that we never see it.

"And so we return to the case of these leaflets which Mr. Good brought to our attention. I did not consciously look for the mark, because I assumed it was there. But when I studied them with the care which they deserved, I noted that these marks were *not* there. And therein lies the solution to our problem."

"You mean . . .?" I asked, astounded.

"Exactly. My old enemy Professor Marty is running an illicit printing establishment, and earning great sums of money through his failure to pay proper Guild wages, or the dues which that organization requires."

"But the card room, Homes," I protested. "What reason could he possibly have for arranging such an elaborate establishment, and what possible connection could there be between Johnson's Warehouse and an illegal printing plant?"

Homes smiled gently. "You may recall the noise involved in the card-play once the so-called demonstration was in session. A printing press has many qualities, Watney, but silence is not one of them. To operate a printing press, one must be prepared for a certain amount of noise, and if this press is to be operated clandestinely, the noise must obviously be covered up. Where better to cover up one noise than under a greater noise—the noise, for example, of the players as they place their wagers and follow the play?"

"Then you believe that this illicit press is being operated on the premises of Johnson's Warehouse?"

"If my theory is correct it must be. Either in an attic or in a basement." Homes leaned across the table confidently. "I have an idea as to how we can get Professor Marty himself to disclose the secret of the hiding-place. It is a device which I have found of use in the past, and I have no reason to doubt that it will be successful once again. Tonight please see that your revolver is available, and we shall bring this case to a successful conclusion!"

Homes was unable to travel to Limehouse with me that evening, as he had to stop and arrange for the various accoutrements necessary to his scheme. However, I had scarcely alighted from my hansom when he appeared at my side.

"Everything is arranged," he said in a low voice. "Pray, pay close attention to your instructions. As soon as we are finished with this conversation, I should like you to enter and mingle with the others in a natural fashion. At precisely ten o'clock you will hear a cry of 'Fire!' as I throw these smoke bombs upon the floor. This cry will be repeated by many voices, for I have stationed the Bagel Street Regulars about the place. Your job is simply to keep an eye on the

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Professor during the resulting confusion. It is certain that he will go at once to the place where the press is concealed.

"A few moments after the initial cry, there will be a general recovery from the shock, and people will begin saying that it was only a false alarm. Things will return to normal. At that point, my dear Watney, you will kindly leave the hall and join me at the corner of the street, where we will plan the next step in our campaign."

To this end I entered the hall and walked slowly from table to table, always keeping my eye on the huge figure that dominated the room from his position at the foot of the dais. At exactly ten o'clock there was a sudden commotion and great pillars of smoke arose as many voices took up the cry of 'Fire!' The orange-haired giant sprang from his place by the platform and limped rapidly towards one corner of the large room as I watched every move that he made. At that moment, however, voices began to cry out that the whole thing was a false alarm, and I watched until the Professor had returned to his place. Then I left the hall and joined Homes on the street corner.

He grasped my hand in great excitement. "Did you watch him?"

"Certainly. As soon as the tumult arose, he left his position near the platform and hurried immediately to the south-west corner of the room."

"What was there?" Homes demanded.

"A fire-extinguisher," I replied.

Homes smiled grimly. "A fire-extinguisher," he remarked softly, as if to himself. "Hanging on the wall! Brilliant! Pure genius! You see, Watney, one might lift aside the heavy draperies in search of the key-hole to a secret passage, but who would ever lift aside a fire-extinguisher in such a search? We accept it so much that we are scarcely aware that it is not a part of the wall, but can readily be used as an agent of concealment.

"Well, Watney; this gaming establishment remains open until midnight, and I suggest that we give the Professor an extra hour before we attempt to find the secret hidden behind that fire-extinguisher. You remembered to bring your revolver? Good! I never underestimate Professor Marty, and I should not like to see harm come to either of us."

We turned and began slowly walking up the street as Homes continued. "Fortunately I foresaw the possibility of our arriving at this point in our investigation, and have engaged a room across the street from the hall. There I have concealed a bull's-eye lantern as well as the other implements necessary to gain entrance to the building. Let us wait out the hours there."

It was almost two o'clock in the morning before Homes gave the

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signal to move. He had been standing behind the curtain of the room watching the building across the way, and he finally turned.

"I believe it is safe now," he said, pulling on a pair of dark gloves. "Remember, no noise! Transfer your pistol to your right-hand pocket for easy accessibility—and do not hesitate to use it should the necessity arise!"

We stole across the street carefully, and Homes tackled the lock on the door while I kept a careful watch in the street against the possibility of a constable passing. A soft exclamation from Homes and I hurried up the steps to join him. A moment later we had entered the darkened room and softly closed the door behind us. Homes lifted the shutter from the bull's-eye lantern and directed the beam across the empty, covered tables towards the corner I indicated.

"Come, Watney," he whispered, stealing forward quietly. "Lift away the extinguisher and let us see what is behind it."

I picked the heavy metal tube away from the wall, and Homes gave a grunt of satisfaction. Neatly placed beneath the bracket was a small key-hole, and Homes applied himself to it at once. A moment later a section of the wall swung back, revealing a set of steps leading down to the cellar.

We quickly descended, stepping carefully on the wooden treads. A turn at the bottom of the steps allowed us to send the beam of the lantern flickering over shelves of playing cards and numerous stacks of new bank-notes.

But what was of greatest interest to us was that there, in the center of the room, as Homes had so accurately predicted, stood a complete printing plant.

We were at breakfast the following morning in our rooms, for Mrs. Essex had returned, when a heavy step announced the arrival of a visitor. Before we could arise, the door burst open, and in strode Professor Marty, shaking with rage.

"It was you, you foul busy-body!" he cried. "Did you think for one moment that I did not recognize you the fist time you stepped into Johnson's Warehouse? I have had you followed every minute since and had my men not lost you while you were crossing the street last night, you would never have lived to uncover the secret of that cellar room!"

Homes smiled coldly. "Pray be seated, Professor," he said. "You are a man of intelligence, and should know when the game is up. Had you not called upon me, I had every intention of stopping by to speak with you, and even bringing Printing Guild officials with me. You are finished, Professor Marty, as you should have known you would be when first you chose Schlock Homes as an opponent!"

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Professor Marty fell into a chair, his face twitching. "Homes," he said, "you are a devil! What do you want?"

"First," said Homes, placing the leaflets on the table, "you must guarantee never again to practice this filthy crime of plagiarism! Through your unauthorized use of the good names of these men you have been responsible for much unhappiness. Second, I never want to see any product of your printing plant come to my attention without the stamp-mark of the Printer's Guild upon it!"

The Professor sat before us, a puzzled, broken man. "I have no choice," said he. "It shall be as you demand." He arose and limped dejectedly from the room.

Homes lit a cigar, and leaned back relaxed. "I suggest, Watney, that you communicate with Mr. Good and inform him that neither he nor his friends will be troubled in the future. And now, Watney, what is new in the papers which might be used to occupy our talents for a while?"

"Very little, Homes," I replied, scanning the morning journal carefully. "Of course there is much publicity being given to the embarrassing position of the Government because of the large amounts of counterfeit money which recently has been flooding the city."

"Counterfeit money?" Homes mused. "It seems to strike a chord. Counterfeit money? Of course!" He suddenly burst into laughter.

"No, Watney," said he, choking with laughter. "I fear that this is one case which I shall not take!"

"But Homes," I remonstrated, "why not?"

"The Professor!" he gasped, doubled over and wiping the tears from his eyes. "The Professor! You recall the stacks of new money in the warehouse? These counterfeiters have victimized Professor Marty himself, and much as I disapprove of their métier, I cannot find it in my heart to pursue them!"

There's a new RANDOM HOUSE MYSTERY every month. This month's:

A masterpiece of suspense, by the author of SORRY, WRONG NUMBER

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BLINDFOLD

Just published. $2.95 at your bookstore

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BEST MYSTERIES OF THE MONTH

recommended by ANTHONY BOUCHER

When one of America's major novelists writes a book in our field, the Serious Literary Critics are apt of obscure the fact, as they've done with that Nobel-winning murdermonger, William Faulkner. So it's probably up to this department to inform you that John O'Hara's OURSELVES TO KNOW (Random, $4.95) is indeed a murder novel and even to some extent a detective story, and a long, meaty and fascinating one which demands your attention.

★★★★ **UNCLE PAUL, *by Celia Fremlin*** (Lippincott, $3.75)

Another winning novel of murder-in-everyday-life by the wonderfully gifted author of last year's THE HOURS BEFORE DAWN, who is still unbeatable at blending domestic worries with terror.

★★★★ **THE OVERBURY AFFAIR, *by Miriam Allen deFord*** (Chilton, $3.50)

A favorite EQMM contributor bases her first full-length fact-crime study on a sensational poisoning in 1613 and a scandal that shook the court of James I—a colorful, careful and enthralling book.

★★★★ **WALDO, *by Lane Kauffmann*** (Lippincott, $3.75)

Elderly fact-crime fancier intervenes in murder in this striking sort of anti-detective story, told as sparkling social comedy.

★★★ **THIS WON'T HURT YOU, *by Nigel FitzGerald*** (Macmillan, $2.95)

Superintendent Laud encounters the season's most grisly murder-method, in a fine specimen of the old-school puzzle modernized by color and humor.

★★★ **A HAMMER IN HIS HAND, *by Whit Masterson*** (Dodd, Mead, $2.95)

Police-procedure novel about police*women*, for a change, with an exciting manhunt for a maniac and a plot rich in surprising twists.

INTRIGUE (Knopf, $3.95) contains 4 spy novels (1937-1940) by Eric Ambler, and THE BEST OF WILLIAM IRISH (Lippincott, $3.45) offers 2 novels and 6 shorter stories (1936-1944) by the man better known in EQMM as Cornell Woolrich. Both suspenseful collections are urgently recommended . . . to readers with strong hearts.

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

Here, for the fifth consecutive month, is a "baptism in print"—a detective story by a beginner. We are proud of our renewed Department of "First Stories" and hope to continue it indefinitely—so send in your stories, beginners everywhere!

Mr. Holden's "breaking into print" shows most of the earmarks of a "first story"; but it has a simplicity and directness not usually found in "firsts," and an ingenuity in the noble tradition of Poe, Carr, Christie, et al.

William Holden is in his mid-twenties, a tall Texan whose hobbies include hunting, fishing, and regular sessions with the gaudy pasteboards—poker, bridge, pinochle—you name it! He has lived in Texas ("the greatest!") all his life and plans, despite college courses in Engineering, Law, and Business Administration, to write for a living. Good luck, young-timer!

THE CLUE OF THE STRANGE CHORDS

by WILLIAM HOLDEN

WHAT A HELL OF A WAY to spend Christmas Eve, thought Gib Thomas. The young reporter sat sullenly in the back room of Fay's Diner. Two bare wooden tables, a few rickety chairs, and an old piano furnished the small room which Fay had turned over to the reporters from the *Record* to use for their coffee-drinking and meeting place.

Gib glanced at his watch. 10:15. His partner, Roger Cason, had been gone over an hour now. Gib had spent the hour calling the night desk at the newspaper three times, talking to the desk sergeant at the police station twice, drinking numerous cups of coffee, and thinking of his day off at home tomorrow with his family.

The wooden floor creaked as Gib heard the heavy tread of his partner's footsteps entering the room.

"Well, you sure took long enough to buy that present."

Roger Cason pulled off his gloves as he dropped into the chair across the table from Gib. Roger's broad shoulders and thick neck gave him a bull-like appearance. "Man, you should have seen all the people in that store! I certainly wasn't the only one shopping for Christmas presents at the last minute. Thanks

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for covering for me while I was gone."

"I was beginning to worry. Didn't the department stores close tonight at nine o'clock?"

Roger leaned back in the chair and put his feet on the table. "Yeah, but I had a flat on the way back. Changing a tire in the snow isn't much fun, let me tell you!"

"Roger, it seems that you're always getting involved in some little difficulty—like tonight. You're lucky you didn't get a call from the office while you were gone."

"You worry too much, Gib. Few situations come up that you can't talk or bluff your way out of. It just takes a little self-confidence."

Gib raised his eyebrows. "I don't know about that."

A sleepy-eyed waiter appeared in the doorway to announce a telephone call for Gib Thomas. Gib was gone about as long as it takes a newsboy to holler "Extra!" three times.

"Come on," he yelled into the back room, "let's roll! There's been a shooting down on Tenth Street!"

Detective Frank Taylor was talking to two patrolmen in front of the warehouse on Tenth Street as Gib and Roger drove up. The patrolmen went inside the building. In his usual brusque manner Detective Taylor turned to greet the reporters.

"Hello, Cason . . . Thomas. You boys want to go to the station with me? We just caught ourselves a suspect."

Roger, as usual, took command. "You guys are working fast tonight," he remarked dryly and then turned to Gib. "You check the scene of the crime and follow me down to the station as soon as you can. I'll ride with Taylor.

Tossing his car keys to Gib, Roger walked with the detective toward a squad car. He was talking hurriedly to Taylor and pointed back to the building a couple of times.

Gib frowned and shook his head as the squad car left the curb, crunching its way through the crisp snow. He shoved his hands deep into his overcoat pockets and entered the dimly lighted warehouse where hundreds of huge crates and boxes seemed to crouch menacingly in the gloom.

A small office near the front door was packed with men from the crime lab. Gib walked up to a patrolman standing by the office door.

"Evening, Officer. The shooting take place in there?" Gib gestured toward the small office.

The policeman recognized Gib as a reporter from the *Record*. "This will make a grim story for your readers. Oscar Banner evidently came down to do some late work and found a burglar here. The doctor said he couldn't have lived ten minutes after he was shot. His wife'll have a sad Christmas."

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Gib scribbled rapidly on the back of an old envelope he had taken out of his pocket, then asked, "Was Banner the owner of this place?"

"No, he was the manager."

Gib noticed an increase in the noise and conversation in the small office. The crime lab men had apparently finished their work. They picked up their equipment and started leaving the office. Gib hurried over to one of them and asked if he could see the scene of the crime. The man nodded.

The shabby little office contained a few metal filing cabinets along one wall. A cluttered desk was at the opposite end of the room and a small pool of blood darkened the floor near the door.

Gib stepped over the pool and noticed a smeared trail of blood extending from the door to the desk, where a patrolman now stood.

"Officer, who called the police?"

"A night watchman across the street. Seems he also saw the killer —a big fellow who ran out the front door."

Gib looked at the desk. Bills of lading, delivery receipts, ledgers, and other papers lay in disorder. A typewriter was shoved to the back of the desk and an unfinished letter was still curled in the machine. Blood stained some of the papers near the front edge of the desk and the telephone lay sprawled on the floor.

Gib made several notes on the old envelope. He leaned forward to read the letter in the typewriter. Near the bottom of the sheet of paper was a blank space on which had been typed:

re09234.

Balancing precariously on one corner of the desk was a telephone directory which displayed blood-smeared fingerprints. The shaft of a padlock key protruded from between the pages of the directory as though it were a page marker.

Gib reached forward to open the telephone book, but the patrolman stopped him immediately. "Sorry— I still have orders to keep everything here just as it was. Don't touch anything."

Gib thanked the policeman, tossed a casual wave to the other officer on duty, then stepped out into the snow.

The lineup was about to begin when Gib arrived at the police station. He slipped into the darkened room and sat beside Roger Cason and Detective Taylor.

The detective turned to him. "Cason tells me he knew Oscar Banner and some of the employees at the warehouse. In fact, he knew where Banner kept the cash box— in one of the filing cabinets. Do you know anything about the place?"

Gib shook his head, but cast a questioning glance at Roger.

Another detective came over to report that there were not enough prisoners to complete the lineup.

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All but two prisoners had been released from the city jail because it was Christmas Eve. Detective Taylor asked Roger if he would help with the lineup and Roger said he'd be glad to.

The night watchman was then led into the room and all the lights turned out except the stage lights. Five men—the two prisoners, the suspect, a detective, and Roger Cason—filed onto the stage and stared blinkingly into the bright lights and at the darkness beyond.

"Now study those men carefully. They can't see you. Take your time, and tell us if you recognize the man you saw running out of the warehouse."

The night watchman pointed excitedly toward the stage. "That's the man! The heavy-set man on the right!"

He was pointing at Roger Cason.

"Are you sure?"

"Dead sure!"

Roger paced his cell nervously. Gib sat on the edge of a bunk. The two reporters had pooled their information and gone over the details time and time again.

Roger had no alibi for the time of the murder except that he was changing a tire on the street somewhere. No witnesses. The night watchman was certain that Roger was the man who had fled from the warehouse. Roger knew the dead man and where he had kept the company's money. The evidence outweighed all Roger's protests of innocence.

"The only way we can get you out of this mess," Gib said, "is to find the real killer. Maybe you'd better tell me about the employees at the warehouse. Could it have been one of them?"

Roger sighed and sat on the bunk. "There's only one I can think of who might have done it, but maybe even F.D. wouldn't go that far."

"What's his full name? And why could he be a suspect?"

"F. D. Power—he's a salesman for the company. His luck hasn't been good lately, and his sales have dropped off badly. Last week he told me that he had no money to buy Christmas presents for his wife and children."

"What about a cashier? Who actually handled the money?"

Roger snapped his fingers. "Oh, yeah! Crieder. A grouchy guy named Crieder handles the accounts receivable and cash sales. I bought some stuff there once, and he was the one I paid. I suppose he knows where the money was kept—he had to know."

Gib jotted down a note on another old envelope. "Of course, that doesn't mean he was the burglar."

Roger laughed bitterly. "No, but because *I* knew where the cash was means that *I'm* the burglar."

"Don't be sarcastic. When was the last time you were at the warehouse?"

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"Friday morning, I guess. Yeah, that's right, last Friday morning. Banner kept his eyes open for stories for me. You know that's a pretty tough neighborhood—never know when something will come up . . . like Oscar's murder." Roger stared at the concrete floor of the cell.

The two reporters continued their discussion for another ten minutes. Finally Gib left the station and started back to Fay's Diner.

After parking the car, Gib scuffed slowly along the snow-covered sidewalk, kicking up little sprays of fresh snow. The toes of his number elevens jabbed forward with each step, seeming, to Gib's lively imagination, to cause tiny explosions in the downy powder. The fine dry snow particles settled slowly back with their cousins on the sidewalk, except for those that were caught on Gib's trousers in the next swing of his long stride.

A neon sign flashed *Fay's Diner*. The dull red reflection on the snowdrifts gave Gib a sensation of warmth.

Gib entered and carried a cup of steaming coffee into the back room. He wandered over to the old upright piano and sat down with his back to the keyboard. He drank the hot liquid without waiting for it to cool. Then Gib swung around to place the empty cup on the piano. His long fingers began softly to play melancholy chords on the keyboard. Music always helped him think when he was faced with a difficult problem or decision.

Gib played for a moment or two, then suddenly stopped. The chords sounded curiously offbeat. He frowned and looked at his hands. He had placed his fingers off the base position—no wonder the chords had sounded strange.

He resumed playing but suddenly stopped again. His hands remained poised over the keys as he stared at the dirty wall. A crack in the plaster ran from behind the piano all the way to the ceiling. With a quick movement he pulled an envelope from his pocket and studied it.

Then he closed his eyes and slowly jabbed at the air with his forefinger. He repeated this deliberate poking a few times.

Suddenly he let out a shout and bounded from the room. He paused briefly in the front of the diner to thumb through a telephone directory and jot down an address.

The brisk night air flowing through the open car window reminded Gib of Roger's cold cell. He speeded up the car, prowling up and down the streets of a modest residential area.

Checking the address, Gib slowed down and studied a small green-shuttered house. He passed the house and stopped the car a short distance down the street. No one was on the street but him.

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Silently he rolled up the window. Frost quickly formed on the glass, concealing the interior of the car. He settled back to wait. There had been no car in the open garage of the green-shuttered house.

Gib had been shivering for quite a while when a car turned off the street and into the garage of the darkened house.

Gib quickly leaned over to reach into the glove compartment. He grabbed the largest object inside—a heavy three-celled flashlight.

He sprinted across the street. The weight of the flashlight in Gib's tight grip bolstered his courage.

A figure emerged from the garage.

"Power! Wait a minute!"

As Gib approached him, the big man hunched his massive shoulders and glared menacingly. Desperation had led him to robbery; discovery had forced him to murder; fear of capture now kindled a rage in his alcohol-fevered mind.

"What do you want?" the man growled.

"I want you to go down to the police station with me," Gib replied.

With the fury of a panther at bay, Power lashed out in the darkness.

A black blur catapulted toward Gib's head. Before he could dodge, Gib felt the impact of a metal box above his ear. The roar of cannons reverberated in his skull as he stumbled backward in the icy snow.

He struggled to his feet. The acid taste of anger mixed with blood in his mouth. He struck savagely at Power with the flashlight and missed.

Power slugged him on the jaw—a hard blow on the button. Gib's vision blurred as he fought back desperately.

The struggle exploded the snow around them. Pain shot through Gib and his eyes bulged as Power clamped his fingers around Gib's neck and began to strangle him. The strength of the man's hands was terrifying.

Frantically Gib swung the heavy flashlight, again and again . . . A groan gushed from Power's mouth into Gib's face. The foul whiskey breath hit him. Then Power slumped to the ground and Gib leaned weakly against a tree.

The lights in the front of the house flashed on, the door opened slightly, and a high-pitched scream knifed through Gib's brain. He turned to see a woman rush to the unconscious figure on the ground.

With a painful effort Gib staggered toward the house to locate a telephone.

Detective Taylor jumped from the squad car and surveyed the chaotic scene. He stuck his toe under the sprung metal box and flipped it over. Leaves of money spewed into the snow.

He turned to Gib Thomas. "Feel all right?"

With a forced smile Gib said,

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"Sure! I do this kind of thing every day, and twice before breakfast."

"How did you discover Power was the bird we wanted?"

"Well," Gib replied, gently massaging his neck, "this is the way I think the whole thing started: Banner caught a burglar in his office, and the guy shot Banner. The burglar then beat it with the money, thinking Banner was dead, but he really wasn't—not yet. Banner crawled to his desk and managed to pull himself into his chair.

"He reached for the telephone but knocked it to the floor. He was rapidly getting weaker. Since he wanted the police to know who shot him, he looked for something to write with. He used his typewriter."

Taylor interrupted. "There wasn't any name on the sheet of paper in that typewriter."

"That's what I'm coming to. At first I thought that re09234 was meant to be a telephone number. But type those letters and numbers one row lower on the keyboard—and it comes out F. D. Power! Banner had his hands *on the wrong row of keys!*"

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LITTLE BOY MISSING

by JOHN & WARD HAWKINS

(continued from page 45)

WALT HUDSON LIFTED THE CURtain edge and peered into the street. He could see the empty walk, the dim glow of light in the windows of the next house a hundred yards away.

"It's all right," he said. "Nobody heard a thing."

Ella said, "You're sure?"

"I'm tellin' yuh, there's nobody out there. Nobody." He let the curtain edge fall and looked at his shaking hand. Twenty minutes now and he was still shaking like a dog.

"They'll find us," Ella said.

He wheeled to glare at her. Her hair was a tangled mess and there were four raw scratches on her cheek.

"Don't give me that!" His voice was harsh. "If they were comin', they'd've been here before now. I swapped cars—ours in the street, his in the garage. Nobody's goin' to do any more yellin', not the kid and not the dame. She clawed you good. You sure she's tied up tight?"

"Taped and gagged," Ella said. "And the kid's out—like he shoulda been all along if you'd fed him the sleepin' pills like you was supposed to." He scowled.

"Walt—what are we going to do?"

He turned to lift the blind. "If you'd use your head you'd know what we're goin' to do. We got to have dough. How far do you think we'd get with what we're holdin' now?"

"Not very far."

"Right. So where's the dough? Benny Shaw's got the dough. So what do we do? We get him off the Island."

"Walt, what about—?"

"The cop? He goes with us. So does the dame and the kid."

"I don't like it."

"It don't matter what you like," Hudson said. "All my life I been waitin' for a crack at the big dough, hustlin' pennies while the heavy money went right on by. But no more. Benny's on the Island with three months to do and the boys waitin' for him at the gate. Benny don't dare go through that gate."

"I know why," Ella said.

"Shut up!" Walt said. "You don't even know the time of day. Benny crossed the boys; that's why they want to light him up. He grabbed the plates and ran, and spoiled the prettiest queer show that ever was. Uncle Whiskers couldn't tell the ten-dollar bills they printed with those plates from the real thing.

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And Benny got away with them. He put 'em in a nice, safe place, and then he took a fall. He got a year on the Island before he could get into production. The boys found out where he was. Baby, the boys are mad at Benny."

"He crossed them. He'll cross you."

"No," Walt said. "He's a scared rabbit. He needs me to get him off the Island. He needs me to keep him alive. He don't know it yet, but he's workin' for me."

"They'll find us," Ella said. "When you kill a cop, they never stop hunting—"

"Shut up!" Hudson's voice was so tight it creaked. "The jerk came askin' for it an he got it. It ain't my fault he's dead." His mouth twitched. "Anyway, we got no choice. I been three months gettin' this set and ready. We go tonight, or we never go. And Benny knows we're comin'. I got a friend that's a deck hand on the supply boat. He told Benny we're comin' tonight, if the fog holds. And you can see it's holdin'."

He looked down at the spread fingers of his hand. "Like a rock," he said. "I had the shakes for a while there. The way it come apart, anybody'd have had the shakes." He turned his scowl to the woman. "They don't make trouble any bigger than I got now. Anybody gets in my way tonight, they're goin' to find that out."

"I'll get ready," Ella said. . . .

Gene Torsen brought the *Skipjack* home. He came into the mouth of the Nesko, past the moaning of Sitka Sands buoy, his running lights on, the throttle barely cracked.

The day-long fog had thickened, the range lights on the river shores were hidden in the mist. Gene could see less than a hundred yards, but the Nesko was his river and he knew it well, every bend, every shallow, every deep. He put the *Skipjack* against the fenders of his landing at a quarter of five.

He went into the house, made coffee. "Any time after dark," Hudson had said. That could mean now, midnight, or not at all, and nothing to do but sweat it out. The hands of the kitchen clock seemed frozen. An hour was a lifetime, two were forever. It was eight o'clock when he heard a footfall on the porch.

He left the living-room dark, the porch dark. There was light enough from the kitchen. He opened the door and then he swore. Gale Saunders was standing there. Gale in a tightly belted, tightly buttoned coat, her face unsmiling.

"Skipper," she said. "What a reception."

Gene was looking past her.

"I'm alone," Gale said. "I walked out. A long haul on a night like this. We've got to talk, Skipper."

Gene fought for control. "Gale, don't argue. I tell you there's nothing more to do." She was shaking

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her head. "Do you want me to throw you out in the road?" Gene asked.

"Go ahead," Gale said. "But I won't leave. I'm staying until you talk to me. All night or a week, I don't care. But I'm not leaving."

She meant it. Gene saw that clearly. She wouldn't be frightened away, she wouldn't be driven away. Gene, suddenly and furiously angry, reached out and caught her arm. He pulled her inside, slammed the door, and then shoved her toward the kitchen.

She turned to look at him, her face pale. But she was not afraid. Her eyes were clear, her mouth firm.

"As bad as that," she said.

"Look," he said. "I don't need your help. I don't want it. Why the devil can't you get it through your head?"

"Because I don't want you killed," Gale said.

"You don't want me killed!" he said. "What about Robin? . . . Sure, you know he's alive. What about yourself? Standing here right now, you've got us all in front of a gun."

"What do you have to do, Gene? You've got to tell me."

"I'll tell you nothing."

Gale looked at him soberly. "What happens if it goes wrong?" she asked slowly. "Or even if it goes as right as it could go? Where will you come out? You and Robin? I know the police. They know and trust me. I may be able to save you years in prison. Or the rope. Isn't that worthwhile?"

He stared at her. He hadn't until now thought much about what would come after the prison break. When it was done there would have to be an accounting. If it came no other way, he would ask for it himself. And then Robin's future and his own would hang in the balance. Gale would help—how much he didn't know—but every bit would be needed. And, to help, she would have to know the whole story.

"Will you do what I tell you?" he asked.

"Yes," she said quietly.

He gave her the story as quickly as possible. He told it straight, not trying to make it better or worse than it was. Gale listened, her face grave. She asked the same questions he'd asked Hudson: How could he know Robin was alive? How could he know he'd get him back when the job was done? What happened to Robin if the job went wrong? Gene gave her Hudson's answers for what they were worth.

"Not much," he said. "I know that. But he made one promise that I believe: he'll drop Robin in a lake if I don't go through with it. You see? I've got to hope, that's all, just hope he'll make good on the rest of his promises."

Gale shook her head slowly. "You can't believe anything he said. Not

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a thing. More than that, I don't think you can get the man off the Island. There hasn't been a break in years."

"This guy's a trusty," Gene said. "I told you. Don't ask me why he wants out, with only a short time left to go. Money, Hudson said. That's good enough for me."

"It must be a lot," Gale said. "The whole thing's so fantastically difficult. So many things can go wrong."

"I know," Gene said. "But what can I do about it? Hudson's got Robin. He's got me tight."

Gale said, "You can call the police."

Gene made a savage gesture. "They quit on me once. I don't know what they'd do a second time. Maybe they'd work it right, maybe they'd fumble it. But I know what *I* can do. Doing it my way, I figure I've got a better chance to get Robin back alive than the cops have—local, state, or F.B.I. Anyway, there's no time. It's set for the first night when it's zero-zero. That's now. Hudson's due now."

"I can't let you go through with this," Gale said.

"You haven't anything to say about it. I'm going through with it!" He walked toward her, his eyes cold. "You can leave now. The back way. And keep your mouth shut!"

"Gene!" Gale said. "I hear a car!"

Gene halted to listen. The car was on the road in front of the house, moving slowly. He wheeled, and reached the living-room in time to see the car lights turn into his driveway.

"It's for us," he muttered to Gale, who had followed him.

The lights came to a stop just short of the garage. He could see the car just clearly enough to recognize the old-fashioned, unwieldy bulk.

"You wanted cops," Gene said. "Here's Ed Kennedy."

He waited, cursing the luck that had brought Kennedy at a time like this. The car door opened. A man got out. He was a dark, fog-shrouded silhouette against the car lights. Bulky and short; Kennedy was tall. The way he walked . . .

"It's Hudson!" Gene whispered. "Get out of sight!"

Gale caught up the purse she'd left on the table. She gave Gene a frightened look, eyes big and wide. The palm of her hand went across her mouth—a promise of silence—and then she was gone.

Gene followed the sound of her feet the few steps to the bathroom, heard the door close. He stood in the center of the room, waiting.

Hudson climbed the porch steps. He came straight to the door. He turned the knob and shoved the door open. There was light enough from the kitchen to show Hudson's face dimly, to show the wide bulk of him. One hand was in the pocket of his dark topcoat, the other

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held a flashlight. He thumbed the switch, and the blaze of light lit Gene.

"Back up!" Hudson said.

Gene went back to the kitchen door.

"The kid's in the car," Hudson said. "Alive. But get this! One bit of trouble and he's dead. That's the order—dead!"

"I got it," Gene said.

"I win or I lose," Hudson said. "If I lose, you lose and the kid loses. Get it in your head." He took his hand out of his coat pocket, showed Gene a revolver. "For you," he said. "For the kid a broken neck."

"I heard you," Gene said. "I'm going. I told you."

"Back up!"

Gene backed again, until his hips came against the kitchen range. He looked quickly at the table; no telltale sign of Gale's presence.

"Where's the woman?" Hudson said.

"What woman?"

Gene saw the barrel of the gun coming, but he couldn't duck. It struck him in the face, across one eye, forehead, and temple. The pain was like sudden fire.

"Figure me for a dummy?" Hudson said. "You got windows in this place. I come ahead and had a look." His mouth jerked suddenly. "Get her out here!"

"Okay," Gene said. "She's here—in the bathroom. But she doesn't know about you. About anything. Let her go." He raised his voice. "Gale!" he said. "We've got company."

"Just a moment." The bathroom door opened. They turned, to see Gale standing easily in the doorway, her fingers busy with her hair. "Ridiculous, this being without a comb." Her voice was light and a little embarrassed. "I'll be going along to Petey's. The cab's to pick me up there."

Hudson let her reach the kitchen door. "Hold that!" His blunt stare found Gene. "Told her, eh?" he said harshly.

Gale said, "Told me what?"

Hudson was still staring at Gene. "Okay," he said. "She goes along with us. She goes quiet or she don't come back. Maybe you better tell her that."

"I'm not going anywhere—" Gale began.

Hudson cursed and turned on her. "Can't let go of it, eh? Still making with the act. How dumb d'you think I am? You can't hear us through the door. You don't see the blood on this guy's face. You don't ask why—" He broke it off, jerking the gun free of his pocket. "I took this guy's kid, see? Tonight he's gonna earn him back. We're gonna take a guy off Easter Island—a con. And you're goin' with us. Now—you want to play any more games?"

Gale shook her head slowly.

Hudson's eyes went to Gene. "You and your big mouth! Could-

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n't keep it shut!" His voice was climbing again. "I got a regular bloomin' Noah's Ark now. But I ain't gonna quit. And you ain't. We're goin' out there. We're gonna get Benny. If we don't, nobody comes back." He rubbed his mouth on his sleeve. "You," he said to Gale, "take this light."

Gale went to him slowly. She took the flashlight. She looked at Gene. "I made a couple of mistakes, Skipper," she said. "Sorry."

"Don't worry about it."

"C'mon," Hudson said. "Give us light where we need it." He seemed to have more confidence now. He lifted the gun for Gale to see. "I'm good," he said. "Fog, dark, anything. I don't miss." He nodded his head at the door. "Get going. Torsen, you follow her."

They crossed the porch, went down the steps, down the walk; all in silence. Gene saw Kennedy's car and remembered Hudson had come in it. Hudson in Ed Kennedy's car—why? Gene didn't know. And he didn't try to think about it. He had room in his head for only one thought: Robin. Hudson had said he was alive.

"Hold it!" Hudson said.

He'd stopped them short of the car. Six or eight feet short. "Put that light on Torsen," he said. Gale held the light on Gene, chin high, not in his eyes. Hudson let them wait.

Gene could see the pale oval of a woman's face beyond the fogged, steamed window of the car. He stared at the face until Hudson spoke to him.

"Steady, Torsen," he said. "Got what I told yuh? The squeeze. You or the kid. Got it?"

"I've got it," Gene said.

"You better!" Hudson's voice was tight again. "Ella! Come out and bring the kid."

Gene watched the pale face move, watched the car door open. The woman came out backward, a thick leg first, big hips, a broad back. She straightened, turning. A blanket-wrapped figure filled her arms. Mechanically, the woman threw the blanket back. Gene saw the small white face . . . Robin, yes! Drugged, apparently, but alive.

After all these days the sight of his son's face was sweet, aching pain. Gene's every muscle was suddenly taut and quivering. "For the kid," Hudson had said, "a broken neck."

Gene glanced at the woman's coarse, expressionless face, at the strong hands holding Robin. These filthy, rotten people! Gene set his jaws.

"Torsen," Hudson said, "there's a girl in the back of the car. Tied up. Get in there and get her out. Hop it!"

Gene went to the open door.

"Give him light."

The light swung and Gene could see Petey—Petey propped in a corner of the seat, legs bound together with white tape, her hands behind

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her, taped. There was a cloth gag across her mouth and above the cloth two enormous eyes.

"Petey!" Gene said. "For the love of heaven!" He got her out, rough in his haste. He held her up and tore the gag from her face, unmindful of Hudson. Petey's breath caught in a ragged sob. He held his face against hers.

"Baby," he whispered. "It's okay."

Petey's voice was broken. "Gene —oh, Gene."

Hudson said, "C'mon, now! Get going! Down to the boat. The light first. You, Ella, next. Torsen, now. One break, one peep from anybody and I'll blast you all!"

They went in single file through the dark and the fog to the landing. Getting aboard the *Skipjack* was hard and dangerous. Hudson was careful. He worked the squeeze perfectly. Never was there a moment when either Robin or Gene could not easily be killed.

Gale lighted the cabin lamps. She lowered a steel-framed bunk. Gene put Petey there. He touched her cheek.

"It'll be all right," he said. "Hang on."

Hudson's orders came fast. He wanted Gale on the bunk beside Petey. He tossed Gene a roll of wide adhesive tape and crouched at the narrow ladder-head, gun in hand, while Gene bound Gale's wrists and ankles.

"The other bunk," he said, then. "Drop it, and come out of there."

Gene did that. He stood in a corner of the wheelhouse while the woman who carried Robin eased past him to a seat on the second bunk. Leaning back, her upper body was out of Gene's sight. But Robin, on her lap, still remained in full view.

"We're goin' back to the car," Hudson said. "Move!"

Gene did as he was told. He led the way across the landing, pinned in the circle of light from the flashlight that Hudson now held. He gave Hudson no cause for worry, but in his mind he was measuring the risk. A quick turn, a quick dive —a fifty-fifty chance.

And Robin? Would the woman do as Hudson had said she'd do? He remembered her face—puffy, dull, eyes dead. A word from Hudson and she moved like a machine. A yell or a shot would be command enough.

"Around back," Hudson said. "The trunk."

Gene obeyed, moving on stiff legs.

"Open it," Hudson said.

Ed Kennedy was in the trunk. Gene didn't touch the blanket-wrapped body. He wheeled to face Hudson.

"You're done," he said. "You can't beat murder!"

The flashlight jumped in Hudson's hand. "He come snoopin' with that girl. He went for his gun. I had to slug him." He paused

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then, cursing. "It's nothin' to you. Lay off it, see?"

"What you get, I get," Gene said. "There was no murder in the deal I made. I want no part of this now."

"You got no choice!"

"I can jump you" Gene said, "and I will. You can't watch me every minute. Once I start, I'll kill you. That's a promise."

Hudson made an ugly sound. "And me with a rod!" he said. "Don't be a sucker. And don't try to scare me. I don't scare. Take me out there and bring me back and I'll leave all of you in one piece. You gonna risk your neck and theirs on a long-shot jump at me?"

Gene said, "Why'd you bring Ed?"

"So the cops won't find him and start lookin'."

"Why'd you bring Petey?"

"Same reason! And the other babe, same reason. And the kid, and this car here. I don't want no yellin' till I'm in the clear. What else?"

"This," Gene said. "Who knows you took Robin and killed Kennedy? Who'll know you worked the crush-out? Me. Petey and Gale. Nobody else. You've got us all here. Put Kennedy aboard, sink us and the boat, and you're clear. Leave one of us alive and you won't get a hundred miles before you're nabbed."

Hudson was quiet. The flashlight beam was quivering.

"Kill five? Think I'm that crazy?"

"You're that crazy," Gene said. "You've got it figured one or five —what's the difference? But I'm the difference. You've got to keep me alive to get you out there and back. Somewhere along the way I'll take you, gun or no gun. But I'll give you an out: take your woman and hit the road. I'll give you thirty-six hours—a clear start."

"You'll give me that when we get back," Hudson said. "You'll beg for it to save your necks. You'll sell out. You did it once; you'll do it again."

"It's murder now," Gene said. "It's all changed."

"Yeah?" The flashlight jerked again. "Tackle me now or lug that guy down to the boat. Let's see how tough you are."

"I'll tackle you later," Gene said.

He lifted the body of Ed Kennedy out of the trunk as gently as he could. Holding it cradled in his arms, he went down the path to the landing. He placed it carefully in the after cockpit of the *Skipjack* and covered it well.

"Now we go," Hudson said. "Wind 'er up."

Gene cast off the lines. He paused at the wheelhouse door. Bending, he could see through the hatch, forward and below. He saw Robin lying on the woman's lap; he saw the strong hands.

Hudson said, "Don't kid yourself—she'll do it!"

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Wordlessly, Gene lighted the compass and started the engine.

He took the *Skipjack* away from the landing, edging out into the channel, motor idling. He cut in the riding lights, then the main searchlight atop the wheelhouse. The powerful beam exploded against the fog, bright, dazzling, and useless. Gene switched it off and opened a window.

He was able to see the bow and perhaps a dozen feet of water beyond. A broken line of old piling came out of the dark and the fog; the *Skipjack* passed within a yard of them. Gene heard the rough drag of Hudson's breath. Nerves like that, in a hand holding a gun, could jerk the trigger before the mind could think. Now that they were under way Gene didn't want trouble before he made it himself.

Gene looked down at his hands. Hands against a gun gave nothing like an even break; they needed all the help they could get. He hunted through his mind for a weapon. Salmon clubs, the galley knives, a gaff-hook. He liked the gaff-hook. It was hanging outside the wheelhouse near the door. Four feet of oak handle, leather-thonged, a strong, curving hook of steel, a needle-sharp point. It was a clumsy weapon compared to a gun, but give him a chance with it . . .

Below, in the cabin, Petey Linn lay with closed eyes, trying not to think about the throbbing pain in her hands and arms, taped for hours now. Gale Saunders was beside her on the bunk, breathing softly. Across from them, the woman sat with Robin limp and still across her knees. She meant business, Petey knew, and her heart was cold with fear for Robin.

Petey felt anger and despair coil and twist inside her. She knew where the *Skipjack* was going and why. She knew what was going to happen afterward. But what could she do to stop it?

"Gale," she whispered, "can you turn over?"

"I can try," Gale said.

She managed it, in spite of taped wrists and ankles, twisting and rolling until she lay on her side, facing Petey. The woman on the bunk opposite watched without interest.

"Do you know where we're going?" Petey whispered.

"The Island—Gene told me."

"Can you sit up?" Petey asked.

"If the hag doesn't object—I guess so."

"Sitting up, we might be able to help," Petey whispered. "Gene's going to try something—I know he is. When he does, we'll have to stop her from hurting Robin."

"Taped," Gale said, "what can we do?"

"I don't know," Petey said. "Something."

The vague shape of a wind-twisted tree alone on a cliff edge had a familiar look to Gene. If he

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was right, there would be a dozen boulders heaped on a strip of sand within two or three minutes' run.

He took the *Skipjack* on, close in, slowly through the fog. He'd found the Island, he was near the cove, he'd missed the patrol boat. How much longer would their luck hold?

Hudson was breathing heavily behind him, grunting and shifting his weight and cursing. Gene felt the strain as much, but he held his silence as the moments crawled by.

Then finally, the cliffs were gone. The hollow bearing of the engine no longer echoed back from them. They had run past the point. The cove should be abeam now.

Gene brought the *Skipjack's* bow around, trying to remember exactly how the cove had looked that afternoon. Round, or almost so, like a coin set deep in the Island's flank. The mouth was narrow and deep—the charts showed that—but there were rocks like the jaws of a trap on either side.

Gene let the *Skipjack* run, staring into the gray swirling of the smoky mist. His straining eyes found rocks ahead, starboard side. He went to port and found clear water. He took the *Skipjack* inside the cover, and when he was well inside he put the wheel hard over.

"What's the idea?" Hudson asked, his gun hand jumping.

"I want her stern-to," Gene said. "Any kind of a bad break and we'll have to run for it."

Hudson swore violently.

Gene took the *Skipjack* astern, feeling for the narrow strip of graveled beach he knew lay just out of sight in the darkness. Slowly, the screw barely turning. Finally, the rudder scraped, the stern lifted. Gene killed the engine.

"Now," he said. "Pray he heard us."

They waited. The aching silence was broken only by small sounds: the murmur of water at the *Skipjack's* flank, the hoarse crying of a gull. Now Gene faced Hudson. The man was still in the wheelhouse door, the gun in his hand.

"No, yuh don't," Hudson said. "Take it easy."

He had to wait. Hudson was alert, his eyes unwavering. Later, maybe. But now wait.

They waited ten minutes, watching each other, listening. Presently there was a soft spill of gravel in the fog nearby. Both Gene and Hudson stopped breathing.

"Walt?" a soft voice called. "You there?"

"Yeah, Benny. Come on!" Hudson didn't turn his head.

More gravel spilled. Feet ran. Then a thin shape appeared in the fog off the stern, splashed out, clutched the low rail. He lay half inboard, half out, panting. Still Hudson kept his eyes on Gene.

"Start her up," he said. "Let's go."

Gene waited. He watched the man aft flounder inboard and

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stand. A tall man and thin, wearing prison clothes, soaked from the waist down. Not a big man, not strong—and that was something.

Gene turned and pushed the starter button. With the motor ticking quietly, he eased the *Skipjack* away from the beach, creeping out of the mouth of the cover. Safely out, there was still the danger of the patrol boat hearing them. Gene went at half speed.

Hudson said, "You know the old jetty on the north side of Sitka Head? About halfway down?"

"Yeah," Gene said.

"That's where we're goin'," Hudson told him. "Take too long gettin' us there and I'll blow a hole in one of them gals. Then the other, then the kid."

"Kids?" Benny said. "Women? What's this?"

"Had a little trouble," Hudson said. "Tell yuh about it soon as I get this guy lined out. What d'you say, Torsen?"

"I'll get your there."

"Good," Hudson said. "Maybe you'll live through it."

Gene heard Hudson back out of the wheelhouse, heard him pull the door to and the latch snap. Alone, he moved the throttle up, setting a course that would take them in a long sweep around Easter Island and up the Sound to Sitka Head.

He had no worry about finding Hudson's jetty. There was a whistle buoy off Sitka; once he found that, he could follow the shore line east to the jetty.

And after he found it?

He had two men against him. One with a gun. Benny was nothing; Gene knew he could break him in half in a few seconds' time. Hudson, built–like a bull, would be rough in a fight, but Gene's hands ached for a chance to have a try at him. It was the gun that made the difference. He had to beat that gun.

Thinking of the trip ahead, the landing they had to make, Gene found a way. Not a good way, but a chance. He'd take it.

Half the trip was astern when the wheelhouse door opened. Benny came in to stand beside Gene. Hudson stood back of them. Benny's teeth were chattering; he held his thin arms against his chest, trying to warm himself.

"I got a deal to make with you," he said.

"Yeah?" Gene said.

"Yeah," Benny said. "I know what you think. You got it figured we're going to put you all on the bottom. We can, sure. But not if I can help it. You want to get out of this alive, don't you? You and your kid and the women?"

"That's right."

"Here's what you do, then," Benny said. "Find that jetty, take us in. We'll tie you up and leave you aboard. Nobody'll find you till morning. That's all the start I need. I got a plane waiting, see?"

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"I see," Gene said.

"Better than stalling, better than trying to tackle us, isn't it? You wouldn't have a chance. Two of us, with a gun. Do it my way and we'll all come out okay. How about it?"

"I'll go along with you," Gene said, and hoped he sounded convincing.

For no matter what Benny said, Kennedy was dead and Hudson wouldn't leave any witnesses alive. Neither would Benny when it came to that. Benny had planned this; he'd have to share the blame with Hudson.

The talk about the plane was something he'd dreamed up to keep Gene quiet. No more than that. But it was reasonable enough so that Hudson and Benny would think he believed it.

Let them, then. They'd ease their watch a little, and a little was all he'd need. Soon they heard a deep-throated moan off in the fog to starboard.

"Sitka Sands buoy," Gene said.

Benny said, "How much longer?"

"Five minutes."

Gene swung the bow to port a point or two, holding the new course at full ahead. Now he wanted to get there fast. Get there and get it done, win or lose.

The muscles of his back and chest were tight and aching, tired of the wait. "Easy does it," he told himself. He had to make this landing look as tough as he could. He cut the throttle to half speed, staring into the fog and darkness.

"This it?" Hudson asked.

"Not yet," Gene said.

"Keep it goin', then!"

Gene knocked the throttle clear to the pin, letting the boat lose all its way. "Have you seen this shore in the light?" he asked. "It's rough—rocks along it that'll rip a bottom at dead slow. I don't care what happens to you, but I want out of this in one piece."

"No rocks where we're going!" Hudson said.

"D'you know how we get there?" Gene asked. "I'll tell you. I don't know in a thousand yards where that jetty'll be. We've got to get in close, feel our way a few yards offshore. Stay out here, and we can pass it and end up in Bayport. If you're half as smart as you think you are, you'll get out there and keep a watch."

"Listen, kid—"

"He's right," Benny said. "Anywhere in a thousand yards is a lucky guess. We'll watch. Are you going straight in?"

"Quartering," Gene said. "You'll see it to starboard. Watch for rocks!"

"All right," Benny said. "Take it slow."

There was a narrow space between the wheelhouse and the low starboard rail. They used that. Their backs were against the wheelhouse window, their attention hard

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and fast on the dark surface. They weren't worried about Gene. He had to leave the wheel to get at them—two men, both forewarned, one with a gun.

But it was the first move. They were out there, their backs turned, their attention occupied. Gene's hands tightened on the wheel.

Slow ahead. The *Skipjack* crept through the swirling dark, yard after yard. Gene's eyes ached with staring. He hadn't lied too much. It was a tough landing. The rocks could hole the bottom and sink them, all hands.

Benny yelled, "Land ahead!"

Gene saw the dark shadow of land almost dead ahead, looming high. He spun the wheel, bearing away to port. He got from slow ahead to full astern in seconds—and barely in time. The white line of foam was only a yard or two from the shearing bow.

Gene put the *Skipjack* broadside to the land, cut the throttle again, and let her ride on the low swell.

"Did I lie to you?" he asked. "We almost had it!"

"Smart kid," Hudson said. "How far we got to go?"

"Maybe a half mile."

"Get on with it," Hudson said.

His voice had a hard, happy lift. And why not? A half mile to go. They had it made. Torsen had bought their story . . . *they* thought!

Their time was nearly out. Quarter throttle, way again. The dark shadow of the shore crept aft. Gene had seen nothing yet to place them exactly. He needed a straight face of cliff. A hundred yards of that ended with the old jetty. The shadow of the land was lifting, curving . . .

Benny yelled, "Closer in!"

"Close enough," Gene answered.

"It's practically straight up and down," Hudson said. "It's plenty deep."

The cliff, then.

"Now we go," Gene whispered to himself.

He thrust himself away from the wheel, bending for a last look into the cabin. He had a full, clear view. Robin was still on the woman's lap. Across from her, almost knee to knee, Petey sat with her left shoulder against the chair set alongside the bunk. Gale was sitting aft of Petey, her face out of sight. But Petey leaned forward, looking at Gene. Her eyes were big; they seemed to hold an urgent message, but Gene couldn't get it. And there wasn't time.

He came erect again.

Neither Hudson nor Benny had turned. They knew the jetty was no more then fifty yards away. They were intent, waiting for the first sight of it. Hudson was forward of Benny, the gun in the pocket nearest Benny. That was a help.

The gaff-hook hung just outside the wheelhouse door—on the way Gene would take to reach the two men. Another help. Petey and

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Gale sitting, wrists and ankles taped, across from the woman who held Robin, would be no help at all. All this, in Gene's mind, added up to something less than an even break. Even or not, win or lose, it was the only chance he'd have.

He advanced the throttle.

Just a little the barest fraction, and they picked up way in the same amount. Hudson and Benny didn't notice; Gene watched them closely to be sure. The tide eddied hard against the cliff face here, ran swift and deep. They would count any change as added current.

Another notch and then another. Half speed now. Gene braced himself on wide-spread legs, held himself away from the wheel with every muscle of his arms ready to take the shock. He counted the seconds.

Hudson yelled, "There's the jetty!"

"I see it," Gene answered.

The jetty's bulk was dead ahead, and they were approaching fast. Too fast, but Hudson and Benny didn't know that at once. They weren't boatmen; they couldn't judge speed or distance. It was Gene's work. They had to leave it to him, and in leaving it to him they lost.

Gene held the bow straight on. In seconds Hudson and Benny yelled; in another second the bow of the *Skipjack* rammed hard against the jetty.

The stop was immediate—half ahead to nothing in a breath of time. In spite of his braced arms Gene's chest was hammered against the wheel. Hudson and Benny were thrown to the deck, a struggling tangle of arms and legs in the cramped and narrow space.

The throttle at half ahead would hold the *Skipjack* on the jetty rocks. Holed or not, she wouldn't sink. Gene was out on deck, gaff-hook in his hand, before either fallen man could rise.

Now . . .

Benny was on top of Hudson, trying to fight his way up from hands and knees. Gene laid the gaff-hook across the man's shoulder. No time to aim. A hard jerk buried the hook. Benny yelled with pain.

Gene dragged him erect. Benny's back arched, his hands clawed at the hook, bone-deep and secure in the meat of his shoulder. There was no escape from it. Gene hauled him away from Hudson, out of the narrow space. Wheeling, he threw Benny stumbling aft and the hook was free.

Now Hudson.

No time. The man was on his knees, facing outboard. He was pushing himself up, his left hand and right forearm on the rail. The right hand over the water showed a dark gleaming. The gun, drawn.

Gene used the hook as a club, swinging at the gun hand. He felt the hook strike bone and flesh, felt the handle strike the rail. The gun was gone, overside, and with it had

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gone the hook, shattered on the rail.

Gene was left with only the butt of the handle. He threw it at Hudson's crouching shadow and followed it in.

A stiff, outflung forearm met Gene, stopped him, held him. Hudson was on his feet, legs braced. Shorter than Gene, he weighed as much and he was powerful. A hand with clawing fingers dug at Gene's chest, caught shirt and flesh.

The back of a hard fist hammered Gene across the cheekbone, tore at his mouth. Gene had Hudson's coat in a hard grip, then. He dropped, falling backward, rolling. He dragged Hudson out of the narrow space, out onto the deck aft of the wheelhouse.

Hudson was thick of chest, thick of neck, a barrel of a man; hard to grip, harder to hold. He squirmed and rolled; but got his short legs under him again, bulling up.

Gene slid away from his back. He got a clear swing at Hudson as the man turned. The fist caught Hudson high on the face. Gene felt knuckles crack, felt the hot lacing of pain in his forearm. He'd used all he had, the best he had, and Hudson's head had jerked only a little.

Hudson came at Gene with big arms spread and hands reaching; wide, stubby hands. Hooked fingers tore at Gene's face, digging. A wild jerk got Gene's face free of that. Savagely Gene lashed out with a kick that caught the man full in his heavy paunch. Hudson doubled forward. Gene clubbed him with a knotted fist, drove him to the deck again. Gene's hands reached for the throat he wanted, found it.

All his strength went into his hands, choking. There was no cold thought in this, only a black, exploding rage. Hudson struggled, rolling and kicking, flailing with his hands. But his strength was waning. Gene knew he had the man.

More strength was all it needed, a little more time. Then he saw legs beside him, thin legs. He ducked his head and caught a thudding blow across the shoulders.

Benny!

Gene let go of Hudson. The upward drive of his shoulders caught Benny in the chest, threw him back. Gene saw him in the light from the wheelhouse, tall, right arm dangling. His left hand held a salmon club, oak and lead-loaded. In a better hand it would have been lethal; now it was only dangerous.

Gene struck with a hammering fist. The blow caught Benny full in the face. He didn't have Hudson's solid weight to stop the impact. He gave before it, stumbling backward against the low rail amidships, his balance lost. He teetered there, crying, and was gone, falling overboard into the Sound.

Gene wheeled, full of driving haste.

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Hudson had dragged himself up against the wheelhouse. His breathing was hoarse. He had little strength, and still he lunged at Gene with clawing hands. Gene met him with slugging fists.

Here was the man who had taken Robin, who had killed Ed Kennedy and planned to kill more. He would try to kill as long as he had life. Gene battered Hudson toward the rail. When the rail came against his legs, Hudson braced himself and stopped, leaning into the sledging blows. His arms were fumbling, his face was red and beaten. He knew what lay back of him and his eyes were wide with fear.

Gene hit him full in the mouth, hammered him overboard.

He waited a moment; he had to be sure. He saw Hudson's wet, streaming head break the surface a yard away. He could see the dull white of Hudson's face, his wild and frightened stare. Later and farther out, a hand and arm turned briefly in the boil of the *Skipjack's* wake, and then sank, going into the deep at the base of the long cliff.

Gene lunged through the wheelhouse to the cabin. Here was a shambles. Gale was lying in the cramped space between the bunks, her body on top of Robin's. Petey was on the bunk where the woman had been, struggling to rise. The woman was cowering forward of the bunks, hands covering her face, shaking with terror. Gene saw there was no resistance in her.

He lifted Gale, dropped her on the empty bunk. He bent again and got Robin. The small body was limp in his arms. But the boy was breathing quietly. Gene touched his cheek. Warm and alive.

The relief was almost pain. He put the boy on the bunk beside Petey, then straightened.

"Where are they?" Gale asked. "The others."

"Gone overboard." Gene tore the tape from Gale's wrists. "Let Petey go," he said. "Tie the woman."

He left the cabin for the narrow foredeck. There he hung head down, overside, searching, port and starboard. If the *Skipjack* was holed, he couldn't see it. The heavy oak stem had taken the full brunt of the impact squarely. It was scarred, but not broken.

Gene breathed a prayer of thanks for the skilled hands that had built a craft as sound as this.

Back in the cabin, he found Gale had taped the wrists of Hudson's woman. Now she was freeing Petey. The moment Petey's hands were free she reached for Robin.

"You two did a job down here," Gene said.

"Not me," Gale said. "Petey butted the woman in the face. She made her drop Robin. All I did was cover him afterward. Don't thank me. Thank Petey."

Gene looked down at Petey.

She was making small, worried sounds. Her hands were flying over Robin's small body—arms, legs,

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back, head. She had to know if Robin was hurt, and nothing else mattered.

Satisfied, at last, she wrapped him in the blanket and held him tightly in her arms. Her eyes were big and bright. Somehow, the look in them told Gene how far the two of them had traveled together—and now this happiness.

Gene lifted an unsteady hand. He was faced suddenly with a clear truth: here was a woman. Petey had become Robin's mother the day he'd found her waiting on his porch. Nothing would ever change that. He bent to take her face in both big hands. He kissed her hard.

"I can't tell you thanks," he said. "But if you'll let me work at it for the rest of my life, maybe I can show you what I mean."

"Great snakes!" It was Gale's brisk voice. "Save your smooching for later. I've got to get to a telephone. A story like this—eyewitness stuff—I'm practically famous. It's 'A' wire, with bylines."

"Whatever that means," Gene said.

"Get the show on the road," Gale said. "I'll pump the hag dry—who, when, how—while you're getting me to Bayport."

"I know part of it," Petey said.

"So do I, but she knows it all." There was a warm shining in Gale's eyes. "Give me a break," she said. "Go on up in the wheelhouse and let me get to work."

"That we can do," Gene said.

He made a bench for Petey and Robin close by the wheel, padded it with a blanket from the cabin. He took the *Skipjack* hard astern, off the jetty rocks, and set a course for Bayport.

There was still work ahead—police, reporters, and the rest—before the thing was completely done. Somehow that didn't matter. The *Skipjack* slogged unhurriedly through the fog. Gene tipped his head to look down at Petey. Robin was cradled in her arms, his eyes open now. Peter was humming a wordless song of warm happiness and comfort.

"Robin," Gene said. "Hi, man."

The boy smiled sleepily.

"We're goin' home," Gene said, "the three of us."

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **RICHARD M. GORDON**

TITLE: ***George and the Dragon***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: New York

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *George's life, from breakfast to bedtime, was as methodical as clockwork; and then the big city reached out and touched him.*

GOTTA SET MY CLOCK. MUST BE 8:15," Mr. Stein would say with a broad smile as he handed George his morning paper. Five days a week for nearly six years he had said the same thing. Mr. Stein liked to tell people that he set his clock by George. George always looked at the watch on his thick wrist and said, "I can't afford to be late. I have a very responsible position, you know."

Every workday morning for more than five years, at precisely twelve minutes past eight, George had left the Hotel Median on 100th Street and Broadway where he lived and walked down to the subway station at 96th. Within seconds of 8:15 he would stop at Mr. Stein's stationery store between 97th and 98th and pick up a *News* to read with his coffee and hard roll. And every morning, on the dot, Mr. Stein would say, "Gotta set my clock. Must be 8:15." And every workday evening, at precisely 5:45, George would stop to pick up a *Journal-American,* and Mr. Stein would smile and say, "Gotta set my clock. Must be a quarter to six."

Between times, George kept the books of a furrier on West 25th Street. That was his life. It didn't change. Nothing ever happened. He wasn't happy or unhappy. He was just alive, running on rails, regular as clockwork.

That's the sort of man George was. He was not only punctual, he was systematic in other ways too. Every morning, for instance, he put his day's money and subway tokens in the left-hand pocket of his trousers and his wallet in the inside pocket of his coat. The Hotel

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Median, where he had a $14-a-week room with a bed, a dresser, a sink in the corner, and the bottom sheet changed once a week, maybe, was not the sort of place in which to leave valuables lying around. Of course, he could have left his wallet under the bed, and the maid would never have found it; she never cleaned there anyway.

In all the time he had been in New York, George had made no friends. He had a small-town distrust of the people of the big city, and he was so dull and uninteresting that no one, not even the girls in the hotel, had ever tried to break through his reserve. He counted on his bookkeeper's sense of order to protect him from the confusion and dishonesty that he saw all around him.

George lived by the clock and by the book. If he kept to himself, minded his business, and didn't bother anybody, maybe nobody would bother him. He felt safe because New York had never been able to touch him and he was proud to be different from the millions of people who rushed about, it seemed to him, like ants and didn't even know he was alive.

He had nothing to do with the other permanent residents of the Median who were all hustlers of one kind or another—a small-time bookie, a hostess from a Broadway restaurant, three chorus girls, a collection man for a Tenth Avenue loan shark, and Max, who was supposed to be in the rackets and therefore dangerous. The transients were mostly newly acquainted couples from the neighborhood bars and hardly had time for big, lumbering, near-sighted George.

It was exactly the same at work: there were hustlers down there too —salesmen and models—and the honest people who made the coats stayed at their benches and conversed in a language which George did not understand.

On Saturday and Sunday, afternoon and evening, he went to the movies by himself. Mr. Stein was probably the only person in all New York who noticed George's comings and goings, and Mr. Stein didn't care much.

And then one day New York touched George.

It reached out and shoved him, in fact, and he suddenly realized that he was just like anybody else —no better certainly, maybe no worse.

Once he discovered that his carefully devised systems couldn't protect him from the world, he took to getting to work late once in a while just the way other people did. Pretty soon Mr. Stein began to set his clock by the radio as he had before. Sometimes George even had coffee at Rudley's late at night with one of the chorus girls who came from a little town in Kansas.

It happened this way.

At 5:15, as usual, George boarded an uptown local at 23rd

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Street and Seventh. As usual there were no seats and, as usual, George stood by the rear door of the first car. He never changed to the express; the local took only a few minutes longer, and the stampede across the platform was more than a peaceful man could take after a hard day's work.

At 34th the pressure of the crowd became unbearable, and at 42nd it doubled. As the train left 50th, George, pressed into his corner next to the door, felt a sharp pain below his ribs.

"Who ya pushin'?" snarled a duck-tailed, sideburned boy in a blue satin jacket with *DRAGONS* arched across the back in yellow letters. His side was against George's abdomen, and he jabbed at it viciously with his elbow. "Ya think ya own the whole train or sumpin?" the boy scowled, jabbing again.

George tried to edge away, but he was packed in too tight. He stood there trapped, his arms pinned to his sides by the crowd, feeling that everyone was watching him and laughing at him. For what seemed like hours the boy elbowed him and sneered at him until the door opened at 57th Street, and the boy swaggered out.

George, his arms free in the moment before the new crowd swept in, felt for his wallet. It was not in his pocket.

For the first time in his life George blew his top; the boy had hurt him and humiliated him, and he had stood there and taken it; but to have his pocket picked was more than even George could bear.

As the door began to close, he saw the boy within arm's length, laughing and pointing him out to another blue-jacketed teenager from the car behind. George saw red.

He lunged at the boy and roared, "I'll show you, you thief!"

He managed to grab the collar of the blue satin jacket as the wide rubber safety strip on the edge of the door closed around his arm. He pulled the boy against the train and shook him. "Give it to me, or I'll break your neck!" George raged.

"Hey, lemme go! Ya crazy or sumpin?" The boy struggled in panic as the train started.

George held on grimly. "Give it back, you thief!" The train picked up speed, and the boy had to run alongside the train to keep his balance.

"Lemme go!" his thin voice wailed over the grinding of the wheels. "I didn't do nothin', honest!" The train sped toward the end of the platform. "Please lemme go, mister! Please!"

In the last second before the boy's feet ran out of platform and before his body was crushed between the train and the wall of the tunnel, the sleazy stuff of the jacket ripped, and the boy fell to his knees as the train thundered by.

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Then George pulled his arm in through the door and stared dully at the torn blue collar in his hand.

"Hey, mister, whatsa matter with you?" scolded a stout lady. "What you try to do? You wanna kill that poor little boy?"

"He stole my wallet," explained George.

"The thief!" exclaimed a dignified man with gold-rimmed glasses. "The ruffian! I'm a witness. I saw the whole thing. That's no poor little boy," he told the stout lady. "He's one of those juvenile delinquents, that's what he is!"

"Good goin', Bud," said a man in a leather jacket and soiled bow tie. "That's the way to handle those punks."

For the first time in nearly six years George enjoyed a feeling of fellowship toward the people with whom he rubbed shoulders every day. Every one of them would have done just what he did. There were people in New York who weren't very different from him after all.

"Aaah, you men!" accused the stout lady fiercely, "you'd kill the boy for a coupla dollars, and you call *him* a delinquent! Shame on you! You're worse than he is!"

George rode the rest of the way to 96th Street in a daze, not listening to the excited buzz of conversation in the various accents and languages of the upper West Side. But the stout lady's words continued to ring in his ears.

"I almost killed him for a few dollars. I'm worse than he is."

In spite of his sense of guilt—or maybe because of it—the feeling of fellowship remained. Suddenly George realized that he had been lonely; he hadn't allowed himself to make any friends because he had been afraid that he was better than other people. But it wasn't true: he had lost his temper like anybody else and had almost done something horrible.

Of course, he thought, he hadn't done the boy any real harm, and the kid certainly had it coming to him—you couldn't pick George's pocket and get away with it! He was quite happy with the way things had turned out. He felt that the people on the subway could have been his friends if he had just had time to get to know them. He was going to get to know some of the people around him—not Max maybe, but somebody.

He was so busy with this new thought after he had left the train and station that he passed Stein's without stopping for his paper.

A few minutes later, at just about the time that Mr. Stein looked at his clock in surprise, shrugged, and turned on his radio to check the time, George opened the door of his room.

The bed was still unmade. The maid, as so often happened, hadn't got to it. And, of course, there on the dresser—where he had left it that morning—lay his wallet.

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IN THE FOG *(Part Two)*

by RICHARD HARDING DAVIS

What has happened so far: Four members of the exclusive Grill Club in London are having supper the evening after the great fog of 1897. One of the four, an honorary member, is an American who introduces himself as Lieutenant Ripley Sears, Naval Attaché to the Court of Russia. The attention of the four diners is directed to a fifth Club member who is sitting apart—Sir Andrew, an influential member of Parliament, scheduled to speak in the House of Commons that night in favor of the huge Navy Increase Bill.

Sir Andrew is about to leave for the House when the American begins to tell of a remarkable adventure he had during the previous evening's fog. Sir Andrew, who has a passion for mystery and detective stories, delays his departure and joins the group at the long table.

Lieutenant Sears relates how he became hopelessly lost the night before. After groping his way in the fog for some time he caught sight of an open doorway in a private house set well back from the street. As he headed for the dim light, a young man in evening clothes came out of the doorway and rushed past him.

Sears found the house apparently empty, except for a servant dressed in Russian livery who was fast asleep in the hallway. Sears roused him and learned that the lady of the house—the "Princess"—had been expecting a visitor. The servant mistook Sears for the expected man and went upstairs to announce "the Excellency's" arrival. While waiting in the silent, exotically furnished house, Sears discovered, behind a carved screen in an alcove, the body of a young man sitting at ease on a divan. But the young man was dead—murdered . . .

AT THE FIRST GLANCE I SAW THAT the Englishman was quite dead. For a flash of time I was too startled to act, but in the same flash I was convinced that the man had met his death from no accident, that he had not died through any ordinary failure of the laws of nature. The expression on his face was much too terrible to be misinterpreted. It spoke as eloquently as words. It told me that before the end had come he had watched his death approach and threaten him.

"I was so sure he had been murdered that I instinctively looked on the floor for the weapon and at the same moment, out of concern for my own safety, quickly behind me; but the silence of the house continued unbroken.

"I have seen a great number of dead men—I was on the Asiatic Station during the Japanese-Chinese war. I was in Port Arthur after the massacre. So a dead man, for the single reason he is dead, does not repel me and though I

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knew that there was no hope that this man was alive, still for decency's sake I felt his pulse, and while I kept my ears alert for any sound from the floors above me, I pulled open his shirt and placed my hand upon his heart.

"My fingers instantly touched upon the opening of a wound, and as I withdrew them I found them wet with blood. He was in evening dress and in the wide bosom of his shirt I found a narrow slit, so narrow that in the dim light it was scarcely discernible. The wound was no wider than the smallest blade of a pocket-knife, but when I stripped the shirt away from the chest and left it bare, I found that the weapon, narrow as it was, had been long enough to reach his heart.

"There is no need to tell you how I felt as I stood by the body of this boy, for he was hardly older than a boy, or of the thoughts that came into my head. I was bitterly sorry for this stranger, bitterly indignant at his murderer, and at the same time selfishly concerned for my own safety and for the notoriety which I saw was sure to follow. My instinct was to leave the body where it lay and to hide myself in the fog, but I also felt that since a succession of accidents had made me the only witness to a crime, my duty was to make myself a good witness and to assist to establish the facts of this murder.

"That it might possibly be a suicide and not a murder did not disturb me for a moment. The fact that the weapon had disappeared and the expression on the boy's face were enough to convince, at least me, that he had had no hand in his own death. I judged it, therefore, of the first importance to discover who was in the house, or, if they had escaped from it, who had been in the house before I entered it. I had seen one man leave it; but all I could tell of him was that he was a young man, that he was in evening dress, and that he had fled in such haste that he had not stopped to close the door behind him.

"The Russian servant I had found apparently asleep and unless he had been acting a part with supreme skill, he was a stupid and ignorant boor and as innocent of the murder as myself. There was still the Russian princess whom he had expected to find, or had pretended to expect to find, in the same room with the murdered man. I judged that she must now be either upstairs with the servant, or that she had, without his knowledge, already fled from the house.

"When I recalled his apparently genuine surprise at not finding her in the drawing-room, this latter supposition seemed the more probable. Nevertheless, I decided that it was my duty to make a search, and after a second hurried look for the weapon among the cushions of the divan and upon the floor, I cau-

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tiously crossed the hall and entered the dining-room.

"The single candle was still flickering in the draft and showed only the white cloth. The rest of the room was draped in shadows. I picked up the candle and lifting it high above my head moved around the corner of the table. Either my nerves were on such a stretch that no shock could strain them further, or my mind was inoculated to horrors, for I did not cry out at what I saw, nor retreat from it.

"Immediately at my feet was the body of a beautiful woman lying at full length upon the floor, her arms flung out on either side of her and her white face and shoulders gleaming dully in the unsteady light of the candle. Around her throat was a great chain of diamonds and the light played upon these and made them flash in tiny flames.

"But the woman who wore them was dead, and I was so certain as to how she had died that without an instant's hesitation I dropped on my knees beside her and placed my hands above her heart. My fingers again touched the thin slit of a wound. I had no doubt in my mind but that this was the Russian princess and when I lowered the candle to her face I was assured that this was so. Her features showed the finest lines of the Slav; the eyes were black, the hair blue-black and wonderfully heavy, and her skin, even in death, was rich in color. She was a surpassingly beautiful woman.

"I rose and tried to light another candle with the one I held, but I found that my hand was so unsteady that I could not keep the wicks together. It was my intention to again search for this strange dagger which had been used to kill both the English boy and the beautiful princess, but before I could light the second candle I heard footsteps descending the stairs and the Russian servant appeared in the doorway.

"My face was in darkness or I am sure that at the sight of it he would have taken alarm, for at that moment I was not sure but that this man himself was the murderer. His own face was plainly visible to me in the light from the hall and I could see that it wore an expression of dull bewilderment. I stepped quickly toward him and took a firm hold upon his wrist.

"'She is not there,' he said. 'The Princess has gone. They have all gone.'

"'Who have gone?' I demanded. 'Who else has been here?'

"'The two Englishmen,' he said.

"'What two Englishmen?' I demanded. 'What are their names?'

"The man now saw by my manner that some question of great moment hung upon his answer and he began to protest that he did not know the names of the visitors and that until that evening he had never seen them.

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"I guessed that it was my tone which frightened him, so I took my hand off his wrist and spoke less eagerly.

"'How long have they been here?" I asked, "and when did they go?'

"He pointed behind him toward the drawing-room.

"'One sat there with the Princess,' he said; 'the other came after I had placed the coffee in the drawing-room. The two Englishmen talked together and the Princess returned here to the table. She sat there in that chair and I brought her cognac and cigarettes. Then I sat outside upon the bench. It was a feast day, and I had been drinking. Pardon, Excellency, but I fell asleep. When I woke, your Excellency was standing by me, but the Princess and the two Englishmen had gone. That is all I know.'

"I believed that the man was telling me the truth. His fright had passed and he was now apparently puzzled, but not alarmed.

"'You must remember the names of the Englishmen,' I urged. 'Try to think. When you announced them to the Princess what name did you give?'

"At this question he exclaimed and beckoning to me, ran hurriedly down the hall and into the drawing-room. In the corner farthest from the screen was the piano, and on it was a silver tray. He picked this up and smiling with pride at his own intelligence, pointed at two cards that lay upon it. I took them up and read the names engraved upon them."

The American paused abruptly and glanced at the faces about him. "I read the names," he repeated. He spoke with great reluctance.

"Continue!" cried the Baronet sharply.

"I read the names," said the American with evident distaste, "and the family name of each was the same. They were the names of two brothers. One is well known to you. It is that of the African explorer of whom this gentlemen was just speaking. I mean the Earl of Chetney. The other was the name of his brother, Lord Arthur Chetney."

The men at the table fell back as though a trapdoor had fallen open at their feet.

"Lord Chetney?" they exclaimed in chorus. They glanced at each other and back to the American with every expression of concern and disbelief.

"*It is impossible!*" cried the Baronet. "Why, my dear sir, young Chetney only arrived from Africa yesterday. It was so stated in the evening papers."

The jaw of the American set in a resolute square and he pressed his lips together.

"You are perfectly right, sir," he said, "Lord Chetney did arrive in London yesterday morning and yesterday night I found his dead body."

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The youngest member present was the first to recover. He seemed much less concerned over the identity of the murdered man than at the interruption of the narrative.

"Oh, please let him go on!" he cried. "What happened then? You say you found two visiting cards. How do you know which card was that of the murdered man?"

The American, before he answered, waited until the chorus of exclamations had ceased. Then he continued as though he had not been interrupted.

"The instant I read the names upon the cards," he said, "I ran to the screen and kneeling beside the dead man began a search through his pockets. My hand at once fell upon a card case and I found on all the cards it contained the title of the Earl of Chetney. His watch and cigarette case also bore his name. These evidences, and the fact of his bronzed skin and that his cheekbones were worn with fever, convinced me that the dead man was the African explorer, and the boy who had fled past me in the night was Arthur, his younger brother.

"I was so intent upon my search that I had forgotten the servant, and I was still on my knees when I heard a cry behind me. I turned and saw the man gazing down at the body in abject horror.

"Before I could rise he gave another cry of terror and flinging himself into the hall raced toward the door to the street. I leaped after him, shouting to him to halt, but before I could reach the hall he had torn open the door and I saw him spring out into the yellow fog.

"I cleared the steps in a jump and ran down the garden walk but just as the gate clicked in front of me. I had it open on the instant and following the sound of the man's footsteps, I raced after him across the open street. He, also, could hear me and he instantly stopped running, and there was absolute silence. He was so near that I almost fancied I could hear him panting, and I held my own breath to listen. But I could distinguish nothing but the dripping of the mist about us and from far off the music of the Hungarian band, which I had heard when I first lost myself.

"All I could see was the rectangle of light from the door I had left open behind me and a lamp in the hall beyond it flickering in the draft. But even as I watched it, the flame of the lamp was blown violently to and fro, and the door, caught in the same current of air, closed slowly. I knew if it shut I could not again enter the house, and I rushed madly toward it. I believe I even shouted out, as though it were something human which I could compel to obey me, and then I caught my foot against the curb and smashed into the sidewalk.

"When I rose to my feet I was dizzy and half stunned, and

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though I thought then that I was moving toward the door, I know now that I probably turned directly from it; for, as I groped about in the night, calling frantically for the police, my fingers touched nothing but the dripping fog, and the iron railings for which I sought seemed to have melted away.

"For many minutes I beat the mist with my arms like one at blind man's buff, turning sharply in circles, cursing aloud at my stupidity and crying continually for help. At last a voice answered me from the fog and I found myself held in the circle of a policeman's lantern.

"That is the end of my adventure. What I have to tell you now is what I learned from the police.

"At the station house to which the man guided me I related what you have just heard. I told them that the house they must find at once was one set back from the street within a radius of two hundred yards from the Knightsbridge Barracks, that within fifty yards of it someone was giving a dance to the music of a Hungarian band, and that the railings before it were as high as a man's waist and filed to a point.

"With that to work upon, twenty men were at once ordered out into the fog to search for the house and Inspector Lyle himself was despatched to the house of Lord Edam, Chetney's father, with a warrant for Lord Arthur's arrest. I was thanked and dismissed on my own recognizance.

"This morning Inspector Lyle called on me and from him I learned the police theory of the scene I have just described.

"Apparently I had wandered very far in the fog, for up to noon today the house had not been found, nor had they been able to arrest Lord Arthur. He did not return to his father's house last night, and there is no trace of him; but from what the police knew of the past lives of the people I found in that lost house, they have evolved a theory, and their theory is that the two murders were committed by Lord Arthur.

"The infatuation of his elder brother, Lord Chetney, for a Russian princess, so Inspector Lyle tells me, is well known to every one. About two years ago the Princess Zichy, as she called herself, and he were constantly together, and Chetney informed his friends that they were about to be married. The woman was notorious in two continents and when Lord Edam heard of his son's infatuation he appealed to the police for her record.

"It is through his having applied to them that they know so much concerning her and her relations with the Chetneys. From the police Lord Edam learned that Madame Zichy had once been a spy in the employ of the Russian Third Section, but that lately she

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had been repudiated by her own government and was living by her wits, by blackmail, and by her beauty.

"Lord Edam laid this record before his son, but Chetney either knew it already or the woman persuaded him not to believe in it, and the father and son parted in great anger. Two days later the marquis altered his will, leaving all his money to the younger brother, Arthur.

"The title and some of the landed property he could not keep from Chetney, but he swore if his son saw the woman again that the will should stand as it was, and he would be left without a penny.

"This was about eighteen months ago, when apparently Chetney tired of the Princess and suddenly went off to shoot and explore in Central Africa. No word came from him, except that twice he was reported as having died of fever in the jungle, and finally two traders reached the coast who said they had seen his body.

"This was accepted by all as conclusive, and young Arthur was recognized as the heir to the Edam millions. On the strength of this supposition he at once began to borrow enormous sums from the money lenders. This is of great importance, as the police believe it was these debts which drove him to the murder of his brother.

"Yesterday, as you know, Lord Chetney suddenly returned from the grave, and it was the fact that for two years he had been considered as dead which lent such importance to his return and which gave rise to those columns of detail concerning him which appeared in all the afternoon papers. But, obviously, during his absence he had not tired of the Princess Zichy, for we know that a few hours after he reached London he sought her out.

"His brother, who had also learned of his reappearance through the papers, probably suspected which would be the house he would first visit and followed him there, arriving, so the Russian servant tells us, while the two were at coffee in the drawing-room. The Princess, then, we also learn from the servant, withdrew to the dining-room, leaving the brothers together. What happened one can only guess.

"Lord Arthur knew now that when it was discovered he was no longer the heir, the money lenders would come down upon him. The police believe that he at once sought out his brother to beg for money to cover the post-obits, but that, considering the sum he needed was several hundreds of thousands of pounds, Chetney refused to give it him.

"No one knew that Arthur had gone to seek out his brother. They were alone. It is possible, then, that in a passion of disappointment and crazed with the disgrace which he

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saw before him, young Arthur made himself the heir beyond further question. The death of his brother would have availed nothing if the woman remained alive. It is then possible that he crossed the hall, and with the same weapon which made him Lord Edam's heir destroyed the solitary witness to the murder.

"The only other person who could have seen it was sleeping in a drunken stupor, to which fact undoubtedly he owed his life. And yet," concluded the Naval Attaché, leaning forward and marking each word with his finger, "Lord Arthur blundered fatally. In his haste he left the door of the house open, so giving access to the first passer by, and he forgot that when he entered it he had handed his card to the servant. That piece of paper may yet send him to the gallows.

"In the meantime he has disappeared completely, and somewhere, in one of the thousands of streets of this great capital, in a locked and empty house, lies the body of his brother and of the woman his brother loved, undiscovered, unburied, and with their murder unavenged."

In the discussion which followed the conclusion of the story of the Naval Attaché the gentleman with the pearl took no part. Instead, he arose and beckoning a servant to a far corner of the room whispered earnestly to him, until a sudden movement on the part of Sir Andrew caused him to return hurriedly to the table.

"There are several points in Mr. Sears's story I want explained," he cried. "Be seated, Sir Andrew," he begged. "Let us have the opinion of an expert. I do not care what the police think, I want to know what you think."

But Sir Henry rose reluctantly from his chair.

"I should like nothing better than to discuss this," he said. "But it is most important that I proceed to the House. I should have been there some time ago." He turned toward the servant and directed him to call a hansom.

The gentleman with the pearl stud looked appealingly at the Naval Attaché. "There are surely many details that you have not told us," he urged.

The Baronet interrupted quickly. "I trust not," he said, "for I could not possibly stop to hear them."

"The story is finished," declared the Naval Attaché; "until Lord Arthur is arrested or the bodies are found there is nothing more to tell of either Chetney or the Princess Zichy."

Sir Andrew rose with disappointment written in every lineament. He pushed back his chair and bowed stiffly. "I wish you good night," he said.

There was a chorus of remonstrance, and under cover of this and the Baronet's answering protests a servant for the second time

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slipped a piece of paper into the hand of the gentleman with the pearl stud. He read the lines written upon it and tore it into tiny fragments.

The youngest member now raised his hand commandingly.

"Sir Andrew," he cried, "in justice to Lord Arthur Chetney I must ask you to be seated. He has been accused in our hearing of a most serious crime and I insist that you remain until you have heard me clear his character."

"You!" cried the Baronet.

"Yes," answered the young man briskly. "It may seem strange to you that I should be able to add the sequel to this story. But the coincidence is easily explained. I am the junior member of the law firm of Chudleigh and Chudleigh. We have been solicitors for the Chetneys for the last two hundred years. Nothing, no matter how unimportant, which concerns Lord Edam and his two sons is unknown to us, and naturally we are acquainted with every detail of the terrible catastrophe of last night."

The Baronet, bewildered but eager, sank back into his chair.

"Will you be long, sir?" he demanded.

"I shall endeavor to be brief," said the young solicitor; "and," he added, in a tone which gave his words almost the weight of a threat," I promise to be interesting."

"There is no need to promise that," said Sir Andrew, "I find it much too interesting as it is." He glanced ruefully at the clock and turned his eyes quickly from it.

"Tell the driver of that hansom," he called to the servant, "that I take him by the hour."

"For the last three days," began young Mr. Chudleigh, "as you have probably read in the daily papers, the Marquis of Edam has been at the point of death and his physicians have never left his house. Every hour he seemed to grow weaker; but although his bodily strength is apparently leaving him forever, his mind has remained clear and active.

"Late yesterday evening word was received at our office that he wished my father to come at once to Chetney House and to bring with him certain papers. What these papers were is not essential; I mention them only to explain how it was that last night I happened to be at Lord Edam's bedside.

"I accompanied my father to Chetney House, but at the time we reached there Lord Edam was sleeping and his physicians refused to have him awakened. My father urged that he should be allowed to receive Lord Edam's instructions concerning the documents, but the physicians would not disturb him, and we all gathered in the library to wait until he should awake of his own accord.

"It was about one o'clock in the morning, while we were still there, that Inspector Lyle and the officers

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from Scotland Yard came to arrest Lord Arthur on the charge of murdering his brother and Princess Zichy. You can imagine our dismay and distress. Like everyone else, I had learned from the afternoon papers that Lord Chetney was not dead, but that he had returned to England, and on arriving at Chetney House I had been told that Lord Arthur had gone to the Bath Hotel to look for his brother and to inform him that if he wished to see their father alive he must come to him at once.

"Although it was now past one o'clock, Arthur had not returned. None of us knew where Madame Zichy lived, so we could not go to recover Lord Chetney's body. We spent a most miserable night, hastening to the window whenever a cab came into the square, in the hope that it was Arthur returning to explain away the facts that pointed to him as the murderer. I am a friend of Arthur's—I was with him at Harrow and at Oxford—and I refused to believe such a crime; but as a lawyer I could not help but see that the circumstantial evidence was strongly against him.

"Toward early morning Lord Edam awoke and in so much better a state of health that he refused to make the changes in the papers which he had intended, declaring that he was no nearer death than ourselves. Under other circumstances this happy change in him would have relieved us greatly, but none of us could think of anything save the death of his elder son and of the charge against Arthur.

"As long as Inspector Lyle remained in the house my father decided that I, as one of the legal advisers of the family, should also remain there. But there was little for either of us to do. Arthur did not return and nothing occurred until late this morning when Lyle received word that the Russian servant had been arrested.

"He at once drove to Scotland Yard to question him. He came back to us in an hour and informed me that the servant had refused to tell anything of what had happened the night before, or of himself, or of the Princess Zichy. He would not even give them the address of her house.

"'He is in abject terror,' Lyle said. 'I assured him that he was not suspected of the crime, but he would tell me nothing.'

"There were no other developments until two o'clock this afternoon, when word was brought to us that Arthur had been found and was lying in the accident ward of St. George's Hospital. Lyle and I drove there together and found him propped up in bed with his head bound in a bandage. He had been brought to the hospital the night before by the driver of a hansom that had run over him in the fog. The cab-horse had kicked him on the head and he had been carried in unconscious.

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"There was nothing on him to tell who he was, and it was not until he came to his senses this afternoon that the hospital authorities had been able to send word to his people. Lyle at once informed him that he was under arrest and with what he was charged, and though the Inspector warned him to say nothing which might be used against him, I, as his solicitor, instructed him to speak freely and to tell us all he knew of the occurrences of last night. It was evident to anyone that the act of his brother's death was of much greater concern to him than that he was accused of his murder.

"'That,' Arthur said contemptuously, 'that is damned nonsense. It is monstrous and cruel. We parted better friends than we have been in years. I will tell you all that happened—not to clear myself, but to help you to find out the truth.'

"His story is as follows: Yesterday afternoon, owing to his constant attendance on his father, he did not look at the evening papers and it was not until after dinner, when the butler brought him one, that he learned that his brother was alive and at the Bath Hotel.

"He drove there at once, but was told that about eight o'clock his brother had gone out, but without giving any clue to his destination. As Chetney had not at once come to see his father, Arthur decided that he was still angry with him, and his mind, turning naturally to the cause of their quarrel, determined him to look for Chetney at the home of the Princess Zichy.

"Her house had been pointed out to him and though he had never visited it, he had passed it many times and knew its exact location. He accordingly drove in that direction, as far as the fog would permit the hansom to go, and walked the rest of the way, reaching the house about nine o'clock.

"He rang and was admitted by the Russian servant. The man took his card into the drawing-room and at once his brother ran out and welcomed him. He was followed by the Princess Zichy, who also received Arthur most cordially.

"'You brothers will have much to talk about,' she said. 'I am going to the dining-room. When you have finished, let me know.'

"As soon as she had left them, Arthur told his brother that their father was not expected to outlive the night and that he must come to him at once.

"'This is not the moment to remember your quarrel,' Arthur said to him; 'you have come back from the dead only in time to make your peace with him before he dies.'

"Arthur says that at this Chetney was greatly moved.

"'You entirely misunderstand me, Arthur,' he returned. 'I did not know the governor was ill or I would have gone to him the instant I arrived. My only reason for not doing so was because I thought

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he was still angry with me. I shall return with you immediately, as soon as I have said goodbye to the Princess. It is a final goodbye. After tonight I shall never see her again.'

"'Do you mean that?' Arthur cried.

"'Yes,' Chetney answered. 'When I returned to London I had no intention of seeking her again, and I am here only through a mistake."

"He then told Arthur that he had separated from the Princess even before he went to Central Africa and that, moreover, while at Cairo on his way south, he had learned certain facts concerning her life there during the previous season which made it impossible for him to ever wish to see her again. Their separation was final and complete.

"'She deceived me cruelly,' he said. 'I cannot tell you how cruelly. During the two years when I was trying to obtain my father's consent to our marriage she was in love with a Russian diplomat. During all that time he was secretly visiting her here in London and her trip to Cairo was only an excuse to meet him there.'

"'Yet you are here with her tonight,' Arthur protested, 'only a few hours after your return.'

"'That is easily explained,' Chetney answered. 'As I finished dinner tonight at the hotel, I received a note from her from this address. In it she said she had but just learned of my arrival and begged me to come to her at once. She wrote that she was in great trouble, dying of an incurable illness, and without friends or money. She begged me, for the sake of old times, to come to her assistance.

"During the last two years in the jungle all my former feeling for Zichy has utterly passed away, but no one could have dismissed the appeal she made in that letter. So I came here and found her, as you have seen her, quite as beautiful as she ever was, in very good health and from the look of the house, in no need of money.

"'I asked her what she meant by writing me that she was dying in a garret and she laughed, and said she had done so because she was afraid, unless I thought she needed help I would not try to see her. That was where we were when you arrived. And now,' Chetney added, 'I will say goodbye to her, and you had better return home. No, you can trust me, I shall follow you at once. She has no influence over me now, but I believe, in spite of the way she has used me, that she is, after her queer fashion, still fond of me, and when she learns that this goodbye is final there may be a scene, and it is not fair to her that you should be here. So, go home at once, and tell the governor that I am following you in ten minutes.'

"'That,' said Arthur, 'is the way we parted. I never left him on more friendly terms. I was happy to see him alive again, I was happy to

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think he had returned in time to make up his quarrel with my father, and I was happy that at last he was rid of that woman. I was never better pleased with him in my life.'

"He turned to Inspector Lyle.

"'Why in the name of common sense,' he cried, 'should I have chosen that moment of all others to send my brother back to the grave?'

"For a moment the Inspector did not answer him. I do not know if any of you gentlemen are acquainted with Inspector Lyle, but if you are not, I can assure you that he is a very remarkable man. Our firm often applies to him for aid and he has never failed us; my father has the greatest possible respect for him.

"Where he has the advantage over the ordinary police official is in the fact that he possesses imagination.

"When Arthur turned on him Lyle hesitated for a moment and then told him exactly what was the case against him.

"'Ever since your brother was reported as having died in Africa,' he said, 'your Lordship has been collecting money on post-obits. The Earl of Chetney's arrival last night turned them into wastepaper. You were suddenly in debt for thousands of pounds—for much more than you could ever possibly pay. No one knew that you and your brother had met at Madame Zichy's. But you knew that your father was not expected to outlive the night and that if your brother were dead also, you would be saved from complete ruin, and that you would become the Marquis of Edam.'

"'Oh, that is how you have worked it out, is it?' Arthur cried. 'And for me to become Lord Edam was it necessary that the woman should die, too?'

"'They will say,' Lyle answered, 'that she was a witness to the murder—that she would have told.'

"'Then why did I not kill the servant as well?' Arthur said.

"'He was asleep, and saw nothing.'

"'And you believe *that?*' Arthur demanded.

"'It is not a question of what I believe,' Lyle said gravely. 'It is a question for your peers.'

"'The man is insolent!' Arthur cried. 'The thing is monstrous! Horrible!'

"Before we could stop him he sprang out of his cot and began pulling on his clothes. When the nurses tried to hold him down, he fought with them.

"'Do you think you can keep me here,' he shouted, 'when they are plotting to hang me? I am going with you to that house!' he cried at Lyle. 'When you find those bodies I shall be beside you. It is my right. He is my brother. He has been murdered, and I can tell you who murdered him.'"

(*to be concluded next month*)

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHORS:	**Frances & Richard LOCKRIDGE**
TITLE:	***Cat of Dreams***
TYPE:	Detective Story
DETECTIVE:	Captain M. L. Heimrich
LOCALE:	Van Brunt, New York
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*Little Ann's story didn't add up—cats never have red eyes, and if she didn't see the cat, she didn't see the man running. Besides, Ann was a most imaginative child . . .*

ANN NOTSON WAS NINE YEARS OLD; she had eyes which in certain lights looked green; there was a kind of glow in her soft brown hair. Her mother had had such eyes and hair, and so Philip Notson, when he looked at his daughter, must often—too often—have been reminded of his wife.

Ann Notson was an imaginative child—a "very" imaginative child, her teacher in Van Brunt District School had written, underlining the word "very." This, decided Captain M. L. Heimrich of the New York State Police, meant that Ann sometimes saw things which were not there or, perhaps, saw what was there in a more interesting form than was entirely real.

There was, however, no doubt of the very ugly reality of what she saw at about eight thirty of a bright, cold Saturday morning in mid-December—saw behind the garage of her father's house on Brickhouse Road in the town of Van Brunt, County of Putnam. She had gone out of the house to find a "kitty." "May I be excused, please?" she said to her father, who was lingering over breakfast coffee, as a man may on Saturday morning. "I want to go out and see if the kitty is all right."

"Um-mm," Philip Notson said. "Bundle up, kitten."

He heard the front door slam

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and stopped, coffee cup halfway between saucer and lips, and expression drained out of his eyes. It was the little, meaningless things which now were the worst things. Jean had always closed doors more firmly than necessary. . . . He wrenched his mind from memory.

What "kitty" did Ann expect to find? A cat of dreams, probably, since they had no cat; a "kitty" who frisked, chased his tail, only in a child's quick mind.

He picked up the newspaper. He made himself read it.

The door slammed again. She hadn't stayed long. No kitty to be found, he supposed. However imaginative a child . . .

"Daddy," Ann said, almost before she was in the dining room. "*Daddy!* There's a man out there. Lying right on the ground. Is he asleep, Daddy? Because it's cold. It's—*awful* cold."

There was urgency in the clear voice; there was something—fear? shock?—in the child's greenish eyes. Philip Notson said, "Where?" and, on being told, went to see. The man who lay on the ground behind the garage, between it and the bank which broke sharply down from the field above, was not asleep.

Captain Heimrich, whose chief concern is with murder, drove up the driveway from Brickhouse Road to Philip Notson's white and gray house at a little after nine. Fortunately he had been nearby.

There were police cars already in the driveway and in the turnaround in front of the garage. He went around the garage and looked down at the body of Malcolm Arthur Bell.

Just two days before, on Thursday, Heimrich had heard Bell called "a very fortunate man" by County Judge Davies, who had just accepted a verdict of Not Guilty from a jury in the Carmel courthouse. Not guilty, that was, of manslaughter in connection with the death of one Jean Notson, thirty-one years old, at about one thirty-five o'clock on the morning of Sunday, the twenty-first of September. Bell's luck had now run out.

"Oh," Philip Notson said to Heimrich. "I see how it looks. He killed my wife. The jury says he's not guilty of anything. And—I said some bitter things and was heard saying them. I see how it looks. All the same—"

All the same, he knew nothing of Bell's death. Murder, if they were so sure it was that. He himself had thought that Bell had stumbled on the rough steps leading down from the upper field, pitched headlong, and landed on a rock. Which, he said with some savagery, would have been appropriate.

Heimrich, a notably solid man, sat and watched and listened to Philip Notson—a slim, quick man, tall and with just a suggestion

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of the tall man's stoop. Notson walked back and forth in the living room and made quick motions with his hands. He was in his middle thirties; his hair was beginning to recede a little; the summer's tan had not quite faded from his mobile face.

"No," Heimrich said, "he didn't fall, Mr. Notson. He was struck. Several times, probably with an iron bar. Sometime yesterday evening. Between five and nine, at a guess—a wide guess, admittedly. He would have come that way, coming here?"

"Across the field? Yes. They used to. He and his wife. Not since Jean died. Since—he killed her."

But it had not been like that—not as Phil Notson said it now, looking down, his eyes angry, at Heimrich. The jury had said it was an accident—an accident in the early hours of a Sunday morning, after a dance.

"Come on and ride in a real car," Mal Bell had said to Jean Notson, a pretty, slender woman in a gray-green party dress, and patted the hood of his sports car. "Just try it and you'll make old stick-in-the-mud get you one."

They had all laughed, not that there was anything especially funny, but because they were young enough, and gay, and had had a good time at the country club dance.

They had all had drinks, but nobody—and specifically, of course, Malcolm Bell—had had too many. Bell said that it was a blown front tire that sent the hurrying little car into a tree, and Jean out of the car—far, far out of it, until a stone fence stopped her diving flight.

"As to yesterday evening, Mr. Notson," Heimrich said. "You got home about when?"

"A little after seven."

Heimrich raised his eyebrows and waited. Van Brunt is an express-train hour from Grand Central. Most commuters manage to make the 5:06.

Notson had missed the usual train, he told Heimrich. He had telephoned Mrs. Billings, who was the housekeeper, and caught the 5:58. Heimrich could ask Mrs. Billings. "Oh," Heimrich said. "Yes, naturally. You came home, had dinner. Then?"

"Read to my daughter. Saw she got to bed—about eight thirty. Read a little longer and went to bed myself. Didn't take time out to kill Mal Bell."

Heimrich said, "Now, Mr. Notson," and then Sergeant Forniss opened the door from the hall and made a motion with his head. Heimrich went out into the hall and closed the door behind him.

A little girl, with very wide greenish eyes and very soft brown hair, and wearing a snow suit, was sitting on the third step of the stairs which led up from the hall, and looking out through the front door.

Heimrich smiled at her and Ann

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Notson said, "I saw a man." She had, Heimrich knew. That she would forget seeing him, after time enough, Heimrich hoped. He said, "Yes, dear," and listened to Forniss.

Then he smiled again at the little girl and went back into the living room, and told Philip Notson that the people across the road had seen the floodlight come on at the Notson place about nine o'clock the previous evening, and said that it had stayed on for about a quarter of an hour. Could Mr. Notson—

"Oh," Phil Notson said, and was very quick in speaking. "That. People looking for the Blakes. Live on Van Brunt Lane, the Blakes do. Next road up. They'd turned off too soon. Told them how to get there."

He looked at Heimrich with challenge. Heimrich told Philip Notson that he saw.

"No reason we would have heard anything," Notson said. "Unless Bell shouted. Maybe not even then. We'd have been in the dining room, the kitten—Ann, that is—and I, and Mrs. Billings in the kitchen."

"No," Heimrich said. "Killing that way doesn't make a lot of noise. Well—"

"You know about the Perkins kid?" Notson said. "What Perkins said he'd do?"

"I know," Heimrich said. "We'll talk to Mr. Perkins."

"Kid of twelve," Notson said. "Crippled now. Who knows when he'll walk again? Because a louse doesn't look where he's going, where he's driving his car. The kid was a pitcher."

"I know," Heimrich said. But he also knew, and supposed that Philip Notson knew—but a bitter mind cannot be predicted—that Bell had not been at fault that time, either; that Jimmy Perkins had been on a bicycle, and had wobbled into the road too far, and that Bell had been driving within the limit, which was forty, through the place they called The Flats, and had done all that could be expected of a driver. (Except, possibly, to drive below the posted speed, which was too high, considering the number of kids, and dogs, on the highway where it ran through The Flats.)

The boy's father, a short and powerfully built man who was a yardman for the Van Brunt Supply Company, had said a lot of things which, it was to be presumed, he hadn't meant. At any rate, that had been a year ago and Perkins had not done anything. Except, of course, to collect a modest sum—modest since Bell had done all that could, officially, be asked—from Bell's insurance company.

Heimrich said, "Well, thanks, Mr. Notson," and went out into the hall. Forniss raised his eyebrows in inquiry and Heimrich shrugged in answer.

The little girl was still on the third step. She said, "You're a policeman, aren't you?"

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"Yes, Ann," Heimrich said and smiled down at the little girl—the pretty little girl who, they said, looked so much like her mother. "I'm a policeman."

"I saw a man," Ann said. "When I turned the lights on. He was running. And a kitty."

"Yes," Heimrich said, but sat down on his heels so that he was level with the little girl. "Running?"

"A funny man," Ann said. "Thick. He ran funny. Why don't you wear clothes like the other policemen?"

Heimrich explained about that. He said, "When did you see the funny man, Ann?"

She had seen him the previous evening. When it was time for Daddy to come home—Mrs. Billings had said he was going to be late, but you couldn't tell—she turned on the floodlights over the garage. "It's my—perogative." She stopped and looked at Heimrich with doubt. He nodded his head. "Since Mamma went away," Ann said. "So Daddy won't bump into anything."

She had turned the light on at ten minutes after six—"precisely"—and she had seen the funny man running away from the house, toward the road. (He was funny, Heimrich decided, because he was a grown person and was running. Which was quite reasonable.) Ann didn't know who he was. He wasn't Mr. Bell. Of course she knew Mr. Bell. He wasn't Daddy. "Don't be so silly."

"And," Ann Notson said, "there was a kitty. Just where the light stops. It had shiny eyes. Like tail lights."

That was unexpected. In semi-darkness, but with light on them, the eyes of cats shine—shine green, shine yellow.

"Like tail lights?" Heimrich said. "How like tail lights, dear?"

"Red," Ann said. "Red as anything. Like in the fireplace sometimes."

"Oh," Heimrich said. "Did you tell Daddy about the kitty with red eyes? And about the man?"

"Of course," Ann said. "He said I shouldn't make up things. *Everybody* says that." She paused. "All the *time*," she said. "He said cats never have red eyes. But this"—

Heimrich touched the soft brown hair, smiled at her, stood up, and supposed that people did, all the *time*, tell Ann not to make things up.

A man running.

A red-eyed cat.

For a moment Heimrich wished that, just this once at any rate, a cat's eyes would glow red in semi-darkness, with a light on them, instead of green or yellow; that such a glow, and a man running, would prove not to be merely things a little girl had made up. It would be bad for the soft-haired child if something happened to Daddy . . .

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Things are collected, are put together. This takes time, since the collection must extend to byways. It takes more men than two. A trooper had been sent to talk to James Perkins, and by no means only to carry out Heimrich's assurance to Philip Notson.

Perkins was to be asked—was asked—whether he still had borne a grudge against the man who had maimed his son. He was also to be asked—was asked—where he had been the previous evening . . . between the hours of five, say, and nine.

The trooper had found Perkins loading sand into a burlap bag in the yard of the Van Brunt Supply Company. Perkins stuck his shovel in the sand and said that, hell, he bore no grudge, hadn't since he had had time to think it over. A kid on a bicycle—well, Perkins drove a car himself. Things happen before you know it; things you can't do anything about. Bell had been decent enough about it—or his insurance company had.

As for the previous evening, Perkins had got home from work a little after five, had had dinner around six, and had stayed home until bedtime, looking at TV. And they could ask his wife. His wife had been asked; had said he certainly had. Wives have been known to alibi for husbands. And it could not be denied that Perkins might, by a child, well be called a "thick" man.

But Malcolm Bell's body had not been found in Perkins's back yard. It had been found behind Philip Notson's garage. So Heimrich and Sergeant Forniss concentrated, most logically, on Bell himself and on Philip Notson.

Bell, on the last day of his life, had driven his wife to New York and put her on a plane for Palm Beach. He had driven back and had a drink at the Old Stone Inn, and told a friend he met there he was thinking about going around to see old Phil Notson and try to get things straightened out.

Half a dozen men had got off the 5:58 local-express at Van Brunt, and one of them might have been Notson, but they had not proved it by late afternoon.

Nobody had seen Notson on the 5:06, and since that was his regular train he probably would have been noticed and spoken to if he had been on it. Which did not prove much, since the most likely thing was that Notson had turned the garage floodlight on at a little after nine to see who had come to the door and, when he found out, killed him. . . .

Nobody had showed up at the Blake house on Van Brunt Lane to say that they had had to stop to ask directions. Of course, the prospective droppers-in might merely have changed their minds . . . Ann's teacher said the poor little thing was a dear, but that she was a *most* imaginative child.

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And—the eyes of cats do not shine red when light strikes them out of darkness. Heimrich had been sure of that, but all the same—since a policeman can never be too sure of anything—he had talked to an eye specialist he knew. "Nope," the ophthalmologist said, "not that I ever heard of. Oh—I suppose an albino cat's might. No pigment on the tapetum lucidum."

"The what?"

"Layer in the chorioid," the eye man said. "Back part of the eye. What reflects light. Good many mammals have it. We don't, more's the pity."

"Are there," Heimrich asked, "many albino cats?"

"One in a million, at a guess. I never saw one. Never met anybody who had seen one. They'd have pink eyes, of course. White cats with pink eyes."

A cat like that would be noticeable, Heimrich thought, and he asked around. Nobody had ever seen one. Not around there or anywhere else. So—Ann had not seen a red-eyed cat. A million to one she hadn't. And hence—not a man running, either, since the two things went together—went together in a child's imagination.

Heimrich turned his car off NY 11-F into Brickhouse Road. It was time to get to work on Philip Notson—to get really to work on him. It was dusk, then.

Heimrich switched the headlights on—and jammed his brakes on; and Sergeant Forniss, sitting beside him, put hands out to brace himself and said, "What the *hell*?"

"Look," Heimrich said, and they both looked—looked at two tiny lights by the road's edge; lights which glowed like coals in a fireplace, like the twin tail lights of a car. Red lights.

The little red lights went out. But then they were glowing from the top of a stone fence. They went out again, but by then Heimrich had the car off the road and they were out of it at a driveway.

There was enough light left to see a cat streak toward a house. A woman stood on the porch. The woman called, "*Boots! Here,* Boots. *Here—*" and then said to the arriving cat, "*You!* Again. *Again!*"

The woman was Mrs. Burnett—Mrs. Harry Burnett. Of course the cat belonged to her. "Come here, Boots," she said again, and Boots came to prove it.

"Oh," Heimrich said, and looked at Boots, who was certainly not a white cat with pink eyes; he was a cat with a black face and deep blue eyes and a black tail. "Oh," Heimrich said. "Siamese. We were looking for an albino cat." He could not remember that, as a policeman, he had ever made a sillier remark. "A cat with red eyes," he added, and felt sillier than ever, looking down at the blue-eyed cat.

"With red—" Mrs. Burnett said. "Oh—you mean with a light on them? Of course. They always are.

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Siamese eyes, I mean. Because Siamese are part albino, you know. Even if you'd never guess it to look at them."

It proved fortunate for Philip Notson—and for a little girl with greenish eyes and an imagination not quite, this time, as fervid as people were always saying—that Boots was a cat who led a somewhat circumscribed life; was a young female who, particularly at the moment, had her own idea about things, and hence was not let roam at large. But a cat who got out anyway, now and again, as she had this Saturday evening, but only for a few minutes.

The night before, however, Boots had got out at five thirty in the evening, Mrs. Burnett confided, and had been gone for an hour or more, and goodness knew where, and one could only hope.

Since two things were linked in the mind of a child, Heimrich and Forniss did not go on to the Notson house, but drove the other way—drove to The Flats and, with not much trouble found a "thick" man standing at the bar of the Three Oaks Tavern.

James Perkins did not seem surprised to see them, but then James Perkins was drunk now—mumbling drunk.

He mumbled a good deal about a so-and-so who thought he could get away with anything, and about bought-off so-and-sos who would let him. And about that so-and-so Bell, who knew better now, knew you couldn't cripple a kid and get off for a few measly dollars. Some drunken men talk a lot.

If Perkins talked enough, Heimrich thought, they might never have to ask a little girl if this was the man—the thick man—she had seen running.

But he would, he thought, some day make a point of telling a little girl that some cats do too have red eyes.

NEXT MONTH . . .

STANLEY ELLIN's	*The Seven Deadly Virtues*
AGATHA CHRISTIE's	*The Kidnaped Prime Minister*
FRANCES CRANE's	*Death in Guatemala*
ROBERT ARTHUR's	*Larceny and Old Lace*
HOLLY ROTH's	*The Six Mistakes*

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a new story by

AUTHOR: **RUFUS KING**

TITLE: ***The Bluebird Persuaders***

TYPE: Detective-Crime Story

DETECTIVE: Ben Coll

LOCALE: Halcyon, Florida

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *A sordid and cynical story of how a part of the "upper crust of society" carries on—in a milieu "where water existed primarily as a medium to bathe in, keep goldfish happy, or to wash your face." There's nothing like knowing how the other 1/10 per cent live . . .*

EDITORS' FILE CARD

THE BULK OF SARAH HARKNESS Faldicci's reaction as she wavered beside the bed looking down on Ralph's copper chest and killingly classical features was one of insufferable disgust.

There was nothing virginal about the reaction. She was, she told herself acidly, quite dry behind the ears, in addition to being internationally ticketed as an over-rich lodestar for every personable fortune hunter on land, in the air, and on the seven seas.

Sarah was still on the sunny side of thirty and looked a late nineteen, a dark Irish Madonna look, and to date she had wed and discarded two husbands. Number One had been a strapping stable boy from down on papa's breeding farm in the blue grass country. Sarah had, she had thought, loved Yancey deeply. Elopement. Papa blew his jets. Annulment, and Yancey had his own breeding farm now.

Number Two had rated as a more *de rigeur* specimen with the mobile hands of the Italian nobility. Sarah had, she had thought, loved Arturo deeply. Papa was dead by the time of this romantic fling, and

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mama was financing her own second marriage down on the Pampas with a stunning lean-hipped vaquero at least twenty years mama's junior.

For Sarah there had come disillusion, divorce, and an Arturo richly poulticed with $100,000, a diesel yacht, and an overhaul plumbing job on the Lombardesque palazzo in Venice.

But Ralph . . . but *this* . . .

She knew they were in some vague town called Halcyon, somewhere between Miami and Fort Lauderdale. A bank of jalousies opening on a balcony exposed a listless sweep of the Atlantic Ocean placidly glittering under the morning sun. The bedroom, with a doorway giving into a large living room, held the sterile magnificence of a typical Florida Gold Coast suite, its cool decor a partial-Empire.

Sarah went out on the balcony. The balconies to her right and left (separated by a two-foot dividing gap) were vacant of guests. She looked down past descending tiers of copycat balconies upon a flock of cerise cabanas and a sun-drenched beach where two chocolate-satin boys in achingly white shirts and faded dungarees were brooming the sand.

How had it happened?

And why?

Well, she did know vaguely how it had happened. That pilot strike on the major airline had gummed up her reservation to New York. It was night when her flight from Nassau had landed in Miami and Ralph, she thought vaguely, had suggested the stopover until some transportation could be arranged in the morning. This morning. Then there had been the bar in the terminal while waiting for luggage—and then?

Sarah drew in a deep lungful of the sea-spiced air, grateful for its cleanliness. She wished Papa wasn't dead. Galling anger began to crowd out every other emotion, except for a commingling sense of nervous fright.

Going back inside, she cast a venemous look at Ralph (his lips were blubbering moist little stuporous noises) and located a connecting bathroom where she faced an arrangement of a man's toilet accessories, with a similar arrangement of her own.

She did a swift job on her face and hair, then started to piece together her various articles of apparel that were parked around the bedroom.

"And just where do you think you're going?" Ralph asked in a morning-after British voice.

Sarah zipped up a silk-linen sheath with fingers that shook. "I'm getting out of here."

Ralph, younger son of Devonshire's Lord Brisbourne, momently resident as a remittance man in the Bahamas, exiled by his father for a repellent stew he had cooked up in England, swung a pair of polo legs

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over the edge of the bed. "Silly of you, don't you think?"

Sarah thought, if he pulls that cliché of let's be civilized about this —"What was that jolt you gave me at the terminal bar? Chloral hydrate knockout drops?"

"No, that gimmick went out with gaslight. Nowadays the bluebirds have taken over."

"Bluebirds?"

"You wouldn't know."

(*Note*: It is not surprising that Sarah, who at the worst was nothing more asocial than being an incipient lush, should be unfamiliar with the skid-row terminology of "bluebird" for sodium amytal. These presently stylish capsules, a beautiful robin's-egg blue in color, are obtainable with reasonably illegal ease in some of skid-row's classier bars. They come in 1-grain and 3-grain sizes and are, understandably, a restricted drug. The 1-grain capsule presents a beneficently sedative dose whereas the 3-grain job is hypnotic, rendering its alcohol-awash swallower tractable to suggestion and blotto to any memory of what occurred while under the drug's influence—this oddity being only true, however, if and while the swallower remains ambulatory.)

"You gave me a bluebird?" Sarah's intelligence quotient was still adrift in the shallows.

"That detail you can skip. The thing is, perhaps you *do* recall being already handsomely potted as a result of Felicia's roof wetting when he boarded the plane at Nassau?"

Sarah's recall of the party's start was reasonably total. Felicia, Lady Compton-Hand, had thrown a "roof wetting" for her newly constructed shack at Lyford Cay with somewhat more than liquid abandon. The native workers and Felicia's gang of guests, under a tattered "Battle of Britain" Union Jack, had toasted the structure with a hearty mixture of cups—Barbados rum, Danish beer, champagne, and American coke—filling and refilling the cups on the workmen's soft-voiced requests of "I'll take another smile." Sarah had thought it all very quaint.

Ralph Brisbourne had been among the guests. Sarah had run into him occasionally at several of the houses during her Bahama stay. Yesterday, she now realized, he had made a rather concerted play, cupping with her throughout the long afternoon. She had found him conversationally refreshing, in that he could chatter on subjects other than specimen fish, reluctantly stuffed on oak trophy plaques.

During the wet, leisurely clambake one of the guests had told Sarah some gossip about him, a scandal involving a London woman close to the court, wealthy, a marriage, a will, a questionable death from an overdose of sleeping pills. Then a sideswipe about Felicia's having Ralph on ice, staked out as

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her next on the list for a soul-searing affair.

And something else.

Sarah tried to isolate it but it escaped her. Something to do with Ralph's family on his mother's side. Russia? Russian? Something odd in his mother's lineage, about her having been (Sarah caught a faint reminiscent inkling) a "carrier"?

"I've a hazy recollection," she said, "of sitting beside you on the flight to Miami. Why were you with me? Why did you come?"

"You needed a crutch."

His casual acceptance of the sordid situation was in keeping with the cynical patina of the people they both traveled with, where anything went so long as it wasn't publicized and exposed.

Sarah always had been what even her puritanical grandmother (a Plymouth Phipps) would have called a good woman. Her two whirls among the birds and the bees had been rigidly sanctified by certificates of marriage and the church. As for the affairs of her set, they neither shocked nor amused her: they were a pattern of life as she had always known it.

In dull truth, Sarah's excesses were nil with the sole exception of a growing inability to handle liquor. This, in a milieu where water existed primarily as a medium to bathe in, keep goldfish happy, or to wash your face. Mama couldn't handle liquor either. Mama was admittedly an alcoholic which was the chief reason, of course, for the 20-year-younger vaquero.

Perhaps, Sarah considered, the only sensible answer was a shot at going on the wagon, especially until after she and Harold would be married next month, because she did love Harold deeply, and if Harold ever latched on to last night's mess . . .

"Look here," she said with admirable restraint, "I'm still in a fog about what happened but I'm willing to forget it. I'll expect you to forget it, too. Just get out of here and go to your own room before—"

A chilling picture came of Ralph's toilet articles tidily arranged in the bathroom alongside her own. "You didn't register us as Mr. and Mrs. Joe Blow, or however it's done . . . *or did you?*"

"Blow? Silly of you to think that. Why should we? We're registered as Mr. and Mrs. Ralph Brisbourne, of course."

"Mrs. what?"

"Brisbourne, dear nut. Quite one of the oldest handles in the peerage. Trots back to that impulsive old glutton Henry VIII who ennobled a Brisbourne blister for his larcenous share in the confiscations in the north. With any sort of luck, say a delicate dose of ptomaine for my revered father and my stuffed-shirt elder brother, it will be Lady Brisbourne. Patience, Sarah. All in good time. And in the meanwhile, you lucky, lucky creature, you have plain me."

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"If," Sarah said, picking her words through the confusion of shock, "you are trying to make me believe I walked through any trick marriage deal while looped with those bluebird things you're either crazy or still drunk. I think you're both. There happen to be regulations—blood tests, a period of waiting."

"Have you ever given thought to the status of a common law marriage in Florida? The legal status? In, say, a property sense particularly?"

"No."

"I have. Frankly, it's about all I did think of during Felicia's rumpot shindig. The only difference of opinion on the legality of a common law marriage seem to concern the question of time."

"Time?"

"The length of time a couple has lived together publicly as man and wife. It appears to vary between a single night of—shall we modestly say, consummation?—and two years. But does it matter?"

"Matter?" Sarah was experiencing that parrot feeling, a clamping, parrotlike numbness of her wits.

"Actually the time element is not important. Among," Ralph smiled faintly, "people of importance. Which we are."

"I wish you'd stop kicking this around and tell me just what it all adds up to."

"Plain as the button on your face. In the eyes of the law, in its commoner aspects, we are man and wife."

"You *are* insane."

"One," Ralph ticked the points off on convenient fingers, "We are registered with your tacit if somewhat offbeat consent as Mr. and Mrs. Ralph Brisbourne. Two, this plush-swaddled hotel's publicity director has released the newsworthy statement of our marriage to the local press and on the wires. I'm sure the morning editions and telecasts will carry it across the nation—probably under such impolite headlines as Shipping Heiress Throws Third Hitch. I rather disseminated the impression that the ceremony took place secretly last week in an unspecified Shangri-la. It has only now been released as an earthshaking item."

"And how do you explain the delay?"

"To give you time, you soft-hearted creature, to break off your engagement to Harold Severance in a gentlewomanly manner."

Sarah was caught on a wave of incoherence. "But the first thing that Harold will know about this rotten lie will be from the newspapers, the newscasts—"

"Obviously. And just what can he do against an accomplished fact? Nothing. What can *you* do?"

"I can expose the whole vile set-up. Everyone will realize it was nothing but a trap to get at my money."

"Will they? After it's known that

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we were identified by the hotel staff and the press as having spent last night together without compulsion in our conjugal suite? Even our own precious libidinous crew at least know how to spell the word *déclassé*. Now really, Sarah. Think."

Think.

Sarah did think.

Her own segment of the situation was fairly solvable. After the publicity died down she could just pay Ralph's price and kick him out. But did common law wives get divorces? *Could* they? That would be up to her battery of estate lawyers, and the common law angle of the deal would have to be suppressed from public knowledge.

But Harold's segment.

In spite of his blue-blooded interior with its several compartments of chivalry, honor, gentility, and *noblesse oblige,* dear Harold, now so deeply loved, was at heart a polished bruiser with the murderous and unpredictable ferocity of a waterspout. The bald announcement via press and newscast of what must necessarily seem Sarah's callous public jilting would, to put it gently, be a strain. And if Harold ever unearthed or even guessed the bluebird truth of the matter, Lord Brisbourne's black-sheep younger son could easily cease from being a living problem.

And Felicia's segment.

Lady Felicia Compton-Hand, more or less perennially widowed or divorced, had the stainless steel exterior of a woman of fashion while her innards were a molten lava bed of the primary emotions—lust, hate, possessiveness, greed. All these unappetitizing attributes were quite plainly delineated in black and white and firebox red with no pastel tones of qualitative compassion. The bombshell of this morning's Shipping Heiress-Brisbourne wedding announcement would, again to put it gently, positively bring out Felicia's more toxic de' Medici strain.

Yes, it was indeed time to think.

"Ralph—"

"Sarah?"

"How did you dare—what gave you the idea of this common-law shakedown? I realize it's a money proposition, but—"

"Look here, old girl. I've always been a bit on the beam as an opportunist. It's my one happy claim to distinction. Now apart from the fact that you were engaged to this Harold Severance chap, would you ever have consented to marry me? I mean with the banns and the bishop and all that sort of thing?"

"No."

"Well, then."

"Just what amount have you decided on to end this farce?"

"We can talk that over," Ralph said, happily discovering and lighting a cigarette, "after we correct the common law status of our publicly blissful union. I rather fancy that tomorrow or the next day we'd best take a jaunt up to Georgia. I

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believe a marriage can be knocked off up there quietly and without any tedious delays."

"If you imagine I'll *legalize* this mess—"

"Yes, Sarah. I imagine you will do just that. How could you divorce me otherwise? Without shattering your reputation? I do hope I shan't have to keep reminding you of the word *déclassé*."

The trap was unkind and its teeth were biting into Sarah's quite adequate brain with points of steel. There was sense in what Ralph said. Damnable sense. Dangerous sense.

Dangerous?

The thought flamed a lurid flash across Sarah's consciousness. That wealthy London woman's questionable death, Ralph's former wife, came into pathological focus. Had the power of the Brisbourne name been able to soft-pedal official inquiry in London completely?

Suppose she, Sarah, were to suffer an "accident" and die with Ralph having their Georgia marriage certificate snugly in his pocket?

Sarah's more recent will had been revoked and torn up after the Arturo divorce and a new one was being intricately prepared in view of her coming marriage (but now no longer coming) with Harold Severance.

This fresher document was still awaiting her signature on her delayed arrival in New York. The challengingly sinister fact loomed that Ralph, if she were to die in her present intestate state, could conceivably inherit a fortune far beyond the trivial discard costs of a Yancey or an Arturo—unless—

"How about a spot of breakfast?" Ralph asked, reaching for a bedside telephone.

Sarah looked at him thoughtfully. It was a different sort of look from the one she had ever given Ralph before—or anyone else. There was a nascent speculative quality in it, a little cold, a little deadly, as yet unset and in a pre-jell stage of a popular dessert done in lustrous shadings of Parisian green.

"All right," Sarah said. "Let's."

"Room service? This is 1201. I want to order breakfast for two . . ."

Shortly after room service provided breakfast, after the same had been downed and its crockery clutter removed from the suite, the desk announced that Miss Bella Hearthstone was on her way up to keep her appointment.

Sarah replaced the receiver.

"There's a Miss Bella Hearthstone coming up to keep an appointment, Ralph. I suppose you know all about it."

"Quite," Ralph said, adjusting the flamingo Sulka belt of his flamingo Sulka dressing gown more securely around his flat middle.

"We arranged the appointment last night."

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"We did?"

"We did. Miss Hearthstone is the society editor of the *Halcyon Sun Chronicle.* She will do a rose-bedewed follow-up on this morning's wedding announcement for their Sunday supplement—our immediate plans, our future plans, a coy distant vista of pattering little feet, and a comprehensive *résumé* on how our mad, gay, passion flower busted into bloom."

A buzzer buzzed.

"That will be she," Ralph said with grammatical elegance. "Handle her, will you, while I freshen up and chuck on some duds?"

Miss Bella Hearthstone was an efficient reporter and her capabilities for ferreting out news were a good step ahead of the social blah-blah that made up her spritely column. Scenically, she was a plump little woman with the tonal qualities of a hot buttered muffin, and she was possessed of an unfortunate tendency in her dress toward a froth of frills, odd cascades of lace, and strings of voluptuous costume beads.

She had primed herself carefully via an overseas telephone chat with her Nassau correspondent (a Mrs. Hamilton Siddons Bleek) on the Bahama scuttlebutt concerning Ralph Brisbourne. Sarah, of course, required no research as her doings practically from platinum-spooned birth had lain in the public domain.

"Honey dear, your hand is like a piece of ice," Miss Hearthstone said returning Sarah's fingers. "Hung over?"

Sarah arranged a weak smile. "Desperately."

"I did sort of get the impression last night that you were riding it out on Cloud Nine." Miss Hearthstone, electrifyingly stylish in a bedizened carnation print, tacked over to an Empire settee. "How's the bridgegroom? Fractured?"

"Not entirely. He'll join us shortly. I imagine he's shaving and polishing up for the interview."

Miss Hearthstone pounced on the word. "Shaving—doesn't it give you a little chill, honey, just every time he holds even a safety razor in his hand?"

"No," Sarah said, thoroughly bewildered. "Why should it?"

Miss Hearthstone awarded Sarah a penetrating reportorial glance. "You didn't know? Why, even a *nick!*"

"Nick?"

"The slightest slip of the razor, the least drawing of blood!" Miss Hearthstone added with a calculated amount of dramatic tension, "Unless proper measures are taken *instantly* — correct bandagings, transfusions—he bleeds to death."

"I'm sorry, but this is all terribly confusing."

"Honey, I do declare you amaze me. Why, it's common knowledge in the Bahamas that his mother was a carrier, that her grandmother was a blood relative of Czar Nicholi I, a woman who had several daughters

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who produced hemophiliac sons."

"Oh, no!"

"Oh, I *did* feel so sure that you must have known! Why, wild horses—"

"It's quite all right. Perfectly all right. I'm sure Ralph was just waiting until the"—Sarah gagged at the word—"honeymoon was over before telling me."

A flash of the dread ailment shuttled across Sarah's mind. She had the average layman's knowledge about hemophilia, sometimes called the royal disease because so many male members of royalty have been afflicted with it. She knew it to be a failure of the blood to clot properly, that it was incurable, and that a little cut could—spell—death—

Miss Hearthstone having made her grisly point, mentally filed it for future reference. Sarah's ignorance of her husband's condition strongly confirmed Miss Hearthstone's intuitive belief that there was something suspicious underlying this sudden union between the shipping-heiress millions and a younger son who had been unpleasantly involved in the questionable sleeping-tablet exit in London of his former wife.

Miss Hearthstone delved expertly but came up with little fodder. The interview continued in the nature of a fencing match. Miss Hearthstone adroitly fished for exact data on where the wedding took place, where the happy twain had met, what Harold Severance's reactions had been when Sarah had returned the ring, how many carats had been in the ring—things like that.

Thanks to her background of social flexibility, Sarah parried all thrusts with the white lies of polite society, with implications, and a soufflé of generalizations that left Miss Hearthstone bewildered and half fed, but still a good bit this side of starvation.

Fortunately, just as the strain was beginning to tell and both ladies were on the verge of considering each other a double-headed monster, Ralph joined them. He wore slacks and an Islands sports shirt, open at the throat, and Sarah's eye fastened with fascination on a little pimple just to the left of his Adam's apple. Should the blade of the razor have . . .

"Ralph," she said, standing up, "it's almost noon and you know how dear Genevieve smashes glasses and decanters when anyone is late. I really must fly. I know you'll forgive me for not joining you and Ralph at lunch, Miss Hearthstone, but I promised dear Genevieve last week."

Just who under the sun dear Genevieve was or what she had been promised last week Ralph, naturally, did not know. Nor, he suspected, did Sarah. "Be sure," he said with an unmistakable edge of dark warning in his voice, "to give dear Genevieve my love."

Toward four o'clock Sarah, after

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busy and fruitful hours, returned to the Hotel Napoleon I. Its huge and ornate lobby, replete with a minor fountain suggesting Versailles, with the magnificent sweep of a hanging stairs to a mezzanine, and adroit massings of tropical foliage that were sprayed daily by a handsome Armenian porter to a vivid gloss, was transient with guests and odd handfuls from the boondocks thriftily showing the joint off to visiting aunts and uncles from the northern hinterlands.

Sarah blended her path to a house telephone and called the suite. There was so answer to her ring. Unerringly, she located a cocktail lounge and cased its shadowy, richly paneled interior from an arched entry.

In a corner, seated at a small table over tall frosted drinks, she spotted the back of Ralph's head and the face of a woman. Felicia, the Lady Compton-Hand. Obviously deposited by air from Nassau. Even across the stretch from where she stood, Sarah could sense the atomic tension between the two. Felicia's features beneath their patrician, steedlike British mold were comparable to a Cape Canaveral count down prior to an important blast off.

Sarah faded toward a bank of elevators and up to the suite where, with remarkable expedition, she went through every stitch of Ralph's clothing, luggage, and belongings until she succeeded in finding what she wanted. There were, in their small glass vial, three left.

Almost on cue a buzzer buzzed and Sarah opened the living room door.

"Harold!"

Harold Severance moved his Back Bay body and well-bred head with its ruggedly chiseled profile into the room. His air of calm was that of a hurricane's eye.

"I had to come, Sarah. Chartered a plane and flew down. I had to know *why*."

"Do stop peering around, Harold. Ralph isn't here. He's down in the cocktail lounge with Felicia."

"Felicia?"

"Lady Compton-Hand. She's one of the Bahama crowd."

"Them."

"They're all right. Sort of moist kaleidescope effect, but basically all right."

Harold, translated into a mass of granite on a puce satin chair, continued to observe Sarah.

"I thought," he said, from deep down, "you loved me."

"Oh, I did—I loved you deeply. I *do*—" The impulsive words, unguardedly, were out and now beyond recall.

"Tell me exactly what happened, Sarah." Harold's virile voice held the deathly quiet that presages bad winds.

Sarah, emotionally, pulled herself together. It had been and still was touch and go. "Just one of those things."

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"I don't believe you."

"Harold, there is one thing you just must believe. What's happened has happened. There is nothing that can be done."

"We will see about that," Harold said.

The next morning Florida's world famous sunshine poured its costly gold through balcony jalousies and across twin beds. It bathed Sarah's face an amber hue and evoked gilt glints in the enigmatic depths of her dark Irish eyes. She adjusted pillows against a violet satin-quilted headboard and called room service.

"This is 1201," she said into the bedside telephone, "I would like to order breakfast for two . . ."

She composed herself to wait.

An efficient quarter of an hour later produced a rap on the living room door and the wheeling in of a breakfast cart by Felipe, a naturalized Corsican with the physique of a cleverly designed armored tank and teeth of a whiteness rarely seen outside an improved-dentifrice commercial.

"Waiter—"

Felipe allowed himself to fill the bedroom doorway.

"Madam?"

"Please tell my husband that breakfast is ready. He is hibernating in the bathroom."

Felipe knocked on the bathroom door.

"Breakfast, Mr. Brisbourne."

Silence. Another knock. Another silence.

"Open it," Sarah said.

Felipe did so.

"He is not in the bathroom, madam."

"Strange. I wonder where he is."

"He is perhaps gone out? Down to the pool for a health producing swim?"

"I doubt it. His bed was empty when I woke up, and after last night's epic binge he would definitely be in no mood to swim. I took it for granted—"

"Perhaps the balcony? The fresh and breezy air?"

"Perhaps."

Felipe stepped out onto the balcony. After a moment he stepped back in, palpably shaken, very pale.

"Prepare for a shock, madam."

"He is out there?"

"Much blood. I would say all of his blood. I am a veteran of Korea, madam, and I can positively assure you with my most regrettable sympathy that I recognize a dead man when I see him."

It was several hours later, while the sun was still rising toward its noonday height, before Ben Coll, the sheriff's chief criminal investigator (a bit Ivy League, *circa* '33) found himself alone in the suite's living room with Sarah.

The Halcyon police, the county's assistant medical examiner, the body, the spate of blood on the balcony—all were gone and the Hotel

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Napoleon I again breathed with restored elegance and the normalcy of picture postal card scenes—sun bathing, bookmaking, girl making, rillets of morning-after pick-me-ups, and death's-door recoveries all over the splendid place from the night before.

"This has been very trying for you," Coll said, metaphorically smoothing on the kid glove treatment. He tried to inject some warmth into the process, but found it hard.

"Yes."

"We've not as yet had much chance to talk."

"Should we have had, Mr. Coll?"

He studied for an instant Sarah's expression, trying to pigeonhole it. Poker-faced? Hung over? Innocent bewilderment? Grief? "I thought it might be helpful," he said, deciding it was none of them, "if you knew how things stood before you're besieged by the press. So far, Mrs. Brisbourne, we've held the reporters at bay."

"Kind—very kind of you."

"We—that is to say, my department and the state attorney's office—are ruling out any question of suicide." Coll observed the faint widening of Sarah's eyes. "We are closing the files," he said, "on an assumption of accidental death—what the British are so fond of calling a death by misadventure. We are quite positive about this, Mrs. Brisbourne."

"You stress the point, Mr. Coll?"

"Why not? Your husband was a hemophiliac. We have the report of the waiter who served your table in the Recamier Room that Mr. Brisbourne was in an obviously intoxicated condition when you both left around midnight to go up to your suite." Coll paused for an instant, wondering just how far it would be politic for him to go. It would be better, he decided, if the outline were ABC plain. "His being in that befuddled state would explain why he would have taken the risk of shaving himself last night, instead of waiting until morning when his nerves and his hands would have been steadier."

"Last night?" Sarah's dark eyes remained impenetrable, but her cheeks had paled a little. "How do you know it was last night and not this morning?"

"There were several indications. The caked dryness of the shaving cream remaining on his cheeks, the amount of the blood lost—but you must find this most distasteful?"

"I do," Sarah said. "But I prefer to know."

Coll stepped carefully into the pedantic. "There are many imponderables. All we actually are sure of is that when an insufficient amount of blood reaches the heart it refuses to act and a fatal syncope results. The moment of collapse varies under different conditions and with different people."

"The loss of blood—it must be heavy?"

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"Again, there is no gauge. However, Draper in his book on legal medicine tells us that hemophiliacs are placed in jeopardy of their lives by the most trifling wounds. In your husband's case, the accidental cutting of a pimple on his throat, just to the left of his Adam's apple. The wound would bleed slowly and the blood would not clot. The amount lost caused us to reach the conclusion that he shaved, or rather started to shave, at some hour during last night. Not this morning." Coll paused for a deliberate moment before asking, "Was Mr. Brisbourne in the habit of taking drugs?"

"Drugs?"

"Sodium amytal, to be specific. There was a small vial on the bathroom shelf with one 3-grain capsule left in it."

"Oh, yes. Those blue things. They helped him sleep."

"We believe that he took one, possibly two. It's the only reason we can think of why, when he cut himself and saw the blood, he failed to telephone at once for medical aid. He must have known only too well how fatal any wound would be. We feel that even though intoxicated he would have realized his great danger."

"Yes, having lived with the ailment all his life—"

"Just so. We think he mistakenly stumbled out onto the balcony while attempting to reach a telephone and that unconsciousness from the drug, added to his alcoholic condition, overtook him. A coma from which he never recovered. You will forgive my frankness, Mrs. Brisbourne, when I say that we also believe you were yourself too intoxicated to realize that any of this was happening, that you came up here with your husband from the Recamier Room, got immediately into bed, and passed out cold."

Sarah's smile was a blend of Madonna innocence and Mona Lisa enigma. "You put it bluntly, Mr. Coll. But it is quite true. It is a growing habit that I hope to be able to correct."

He said with candor, "I hope you do." He said he would leave her to the arrangements she would have to face—the press, the notifications of her husband's death, the various details of the interment. He could not resist it—could not resist leaving her on the note that the body would be at her ultimate disposal by nightfall.

Coll's emphasis on the word "ultimate" was so fragile that it hung with no touchable significance in the quiet air.

The meeting between Felicia and Harold Severance lasted no longer than the consumption of a Planter's Punch. Each drank the tall, frosted, delicious nitroglycerine while they eyed one another warily across a table in the all but empty mid-afternoon cocktail lounge.

"What you and I are, of course,"

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Felicia said with a brief laugh that held a remote cousinship to a whinny, "is nothing better than a couple of discards in search of a meld." She looked at Harold with speculative, cosmetic-rimmed, steel-colored eyes. "Rather clever that, what?"

"Very clever. What."

Harold (now and still so deeply loved by up-in-her-suite, busy Sarah) was filled with an ineffable sense of revulsion against this brittle woman who had suggested that a tête-à-tête might be advisable before she hopped back to the Bahamas.

"Are you satisfied with the official verdict of accidental death?" she asked.

"Pleased would be a better word."

"That sheriff's man—what a doll! So utterly virile in a cultured pattern. His eyes positively pierced . . . I thought you and I had better check."

"On what, Lady Compton-Hand?"

"Surely Felicia is simpler?"

"Felicia."

"On the things he doesn't know."

"What things—Felicia?"

"That absurd release Ralph gave to the press."

"Absurd?"

"Certainly absurd. Take the nonsense that the wedding announcement was withheld in order to give Sarah time decently to break off her engagement with you."

"Well?"

"Oh, for heaven's sakes don't start being difficult. Sarah never did break the engagement. *did* she, now?"

"No."

"Did you tell that sheriff's man so?"

"No. Mr. Coll did not ask."

"Coll—of course, the good-looking creature's name. Shall I tell you why Sarah didn't?"

"If you wish."

"Because Sarah and Ralph were never married. They couldn't have been."

'What are you saying?"

"Facts, my dear wide-eyed child. Sarah was dropped on the Bahamas from the Titherton yacht barely a week ago. She shacked up at the Walfords', in that monstrosity of theirs with its Persian antiques. The point is, the Walfords had her on the go every minute. Definitely a cloudburst of dinners, fetes, and what-have-you."

"Well?"

"Well, this. During that same period Ralph, rest his attractive greedy hide, was being kept on ice by me. There simply wasn't time—not a blessed moment when they *could* have skipped off together and got married."

Harold gave Felicia a steady Groton-and-Harvard, Gallahadish look. "I know what you are implying," he said evenly, "and I don't believe it. Not Sarah."

"Not while in her true senses, no. Not if she had known what she was about."

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"Rubbish. Everyone knows Sarah drinks, but never to that extent."

"Not the drink. The sodium amytal."

"The what?"

"A habit of Ralph's. Bluebirds, he used to call them. A contemporary version of knockout drops."

Blood surged hotly into Harold's face. "How could you know this?"

"It was standard procedure with the lad. He'd pack the powder from the capsules into the recessed space in the filter tip of one of your American cigarettes. Then while her attention was distracted he'd tap it into the drink of whatever new pigeon he was out to snare."

"What makes you so sure?"

"Simple, sweet boy. Ralph not only used those bluebird persuaders on half the Bahamas, he used them on me."

"You caught him trying it?"

Felicia shrugged. "I let him get away with it. Why not? I intended to buy him, and after all it's generally a good plan to know exactly what one intends to pay for."

This was too strong for Harold. He said stiffly, "I suppose you dumped all this filth on Mr. Coll?"

"Don't be a fool, child. No woman admits she's been chucked for another woman of her own set. No, I said nothing to that ravishing sheriff's man beyond making a tentative suggestion or two. None of which concerned Ralph's death."

"Then why tell me?"

"To button you up. You now know the truth and it will keep you from poking around, as you would have, and from sounding off. After all, I do have my own reputation to consider. As a *femme fatale* of invincible charm."

Harold brutally shoved back his chair.

"I'll say goodbye," he said.

Felicia adjusted a pair of cerise mesh mittens. "You'll take a run up and see Sarah, I daresay?"

Harold dragged his eyes from the reptilian hypnotism of Felicia's gaze. "When I think of what she must have suffered! Must *be* suffering!" he muttered.

Harold's next conscious words were spoken in the elevator when he said, "Twelfth floor."

That evening, after Felicia had soared back for Nassau with the always gap prospect of embarking on a fresh safari along the spoor of loose male scalps, and while Sarah and Harold were deeply-in-love dining on a moon-washed and mimosa-scented terrace of the Hotel Napoleon I, Ben Coll was enjoying coffee and brandy with his fetching wife Ellen on the patio of their ranch-style home at the outskirts of Halcyon.

"Now tell me what *really* happened," Ellen said.

Coll's admirable features settled in a frown. "I only wish I could be sure. On the surface, it's a simple case of accidental death—a hemophiliac cuts himself while shaving.

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He's drunk, and doped, passes out, and loses enough blood to stop his heart. Just as simple as that."

"But you don't think so?"

"I've got to think so. They've passed the word. Everybody is happy as a lark—the state attorney, the boys in Halcyon, my boss, and even Scotland Yard."

"What's Scotland Yard got to do with it?"

"One of their jokers, an Inspector Pinkwater, breezed over here from Nassau as soon as he learned of the death. The ironic touch is that he had just come from London to extradite young Brisbourne and take him back to England to stand trial for murder."

"Whose murder?"

"His former wife. According to Pinkwater, new evidence popped up a few days ago proving conclusively that Brisbourne eased her out with a mess of sleeping pills."

Ellen replenished the balloon glasses. "Seems as though all's well that ends well."

"I don't know. The man was a thorough rotter, Ellen—that's for sure. Also, he was slated to get the rope in any case—even if he hadn't died as he did."

"Honestly, dear, what more do you want? Right triumphs, justice conquers all."

"No, I prefer the truth. I don't like the notion of anyone getting away with murder. Even if the victim is himself a murderer." Coll fondly reached tanned fingers and patted Ellen's hand. "Sets a bad precedent."

"Just what *is* wrong, Ben?"

"The whole setup is wrong. Mind you, there isn't one piece of evidence that's acceptable to Harrison." (Harrison was the state prosecutor.) "He says, and rightly, Ellen, that the jet-propelled type of legal talent the defense could afford to line up would have the case laughed out of court—if it ever even got past the grand jury. But there's one thing I know: that man never cut himself while shaving! And no *man* cut him."

"You sound certain, mister."

"I am. Take a look at this." Coll handed a police photograph to Ellen. "It's a close-up of Brisbourne's face and throat. Study it. It proves the killer was a woman."

Ellen took the picture. "It looks all right to me, Ben—if one cares for Chamber of Horrors candid shots. You say a woman? Why rule out the Severance man? The jilted fiancé?"

"You just keep on looking at that picture. It's got the answer. Sure, Severance had the old standby motive of jealousy, with a dash of hatred and revenge. And so did the Bahama woman, Felicia Compton-Hand—my information from the islands is that she considered young Brisbourne her personal property. I rather got the idea myself when I talked with her. Incidentally, as another interesting facet of her character, she tried to make me."

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"Did she?"

"No."

"You must be aging faster than I thought. Well, at least the blushing bride, the Mrs. Sarah Fort Knox, is in the clear. She couldn't conceivably have a motive, and I still don't see anything in this photograph but a partly shaved face and throat and that nasty black line made by the blood."

"Keep studying it, Ellen. I want the woman's point of view. And what would you say if I told you there is a strong probability that Sarah and Ralph Brisbourne were never legally married?"

"I'd say you were utterly and delightfully mad, dear. What makes you think so?"

"You know that society reporter for the *Chronicle?* Bella Hearthstone?"

"I read her column. As who among us frustrated housewives does not?"

"All right. Point is, she's damn smart. We downed a couple at Harry's just before I came home."

"Oh, yes?"

"Don't be bitter, dear. And keep trying to figure what that photograph means."

"To date, still nothing. Now how about this Hearthstone tryst at Harry's?"

"It was no tryst. We just happened to bump into each other there, and she wanted the latest news on the case."

"I bet."

"Seems she was suspicious about this secret marriage stuff. Yesterday noon she wiggled out of a phony luncheon setup with Ralph Brisbourne and spent an hour or so tailing Sarah. She found out from the hotel doorman that Sarah had taken a taxi to the Miami Public Library."

"To look up a treatise on shaving, no doubt?"

"Not shaving. Hemophilia. Harrison says, *and* rightly, that a defense attorney would blandly point out that having just learned of Brisbourne's hemophilia she would naturally want to familiarize herself with the ailment. To be of help in case of any emergency."

"*Just* learned about it?"

"Bella Hearthstone sprang it on her when she interviewed her. Hearthstone is sure that until that moment Sarah knew nothing about it. Now does that seem reasonable?"

"No, it doesn't—no more than this caricature of Bela Lugosi in one of his better vampire effects."

"Take your time. Hearthstone had further found out from her Nassau correspondent that no Brisbourne wedding was recorded on the islands. The correspondent not only stated positively that Sarah and Brisbourne had never met before last week but that—and this is the clincher—at no time since their meeting had it been possible for them to beat it to any place whatsoever for a secret marriage."

"So I suppose the rat got her

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fractured, got her set for the night, and then slapped a phony marriage deal at her when she woke up?"

"Makes sense to me. Motive enough?"

"Plenty enough."

"Then take the matter of the electric shaver."

"What electric shaver?"

"The fact that it was missing and a safety razor had been substituted in its place."

"Oh, look now!"

"I know, but it's not all conjecture. Ever see that lotion advertised that you rub on your face before using an electric shaver? It states on the label that it conditions the skin for a smoother job."

"Vaguely, I think I have."

"Well, there was a bottle of that stuff on the bathroom shelf, but no electric shaver. I looked."

"Maybe he just wanted a change of pace."

"Use the old bean, Ellen. The guy was a hemophiliac. It stands to reason he wouldn't be caught dead using an ordinary razor that might cut him, when he could use an electric one."

"Then why did he chuck the electric one?"

"He didn't. Sarah did. Bella Hearthstone trailed her from the library to a drug store and watched her buy it. I'm telling you that Sarah first drugged Brisbourne's nightcap with sodium amytal—this I admit we've got to guess at. But what we don't have to guess at is that when he passed out, Sarah lathered his face with shaving cream, took a swipe at starting to shave him, and *deliberately* cut that pimple on his throat. That photograph, the one you're so blind about, proves it."

Ellen studied the picture more intently. "Frankly, darling, I don't get it."

"Take a look at the patterns left by the dried shaving cream."

"All right. I have."

"What do you see?"

"Well, the cream is caked on both cheeks and the upper lip, then down the sides of the neck. There's a shaved track down the middle of the chin and down along the center of the throat, where the blood starts."

"Exactly. And there's your answer, Ellen. *No man on earth starts to shave by taking a couple of strokes down his chin and along his throat.* He shaves his cheeks first, then usually his upper lip and *then* his chin and throat. No, Ellen, nobody but a woman who knew nothing about shaving a man's face did that job. Nobody," he added quietly, "but Sarah."

Elleen stood up and walked around to Coll's chair. She placed her hands lightly on his shoulders. "Ben, dear—"

"Yes?"

"You may be right."

"I am right."

"You can't be positive."

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"I am positive."

"Still, there are other considerations."

"What considerations?"

"Brisbourne got what he deserved—much better than he deserved. Think what he was spared. Months, terrible months of waiting for that moment on the gallows. Dying a hellish private death each day by waiting day. Not as it was—an easy sleep." She pressed her fingers gently on his cheek. "What will you do?"

"Nothing. As things are, there's nothing I could do even if I wanted to." Coll captured her hand. His brief laugh was not entirely without humor. "And anyhow, angel, why spoil the party? As I've said, everybody's happy. Even the corpse."

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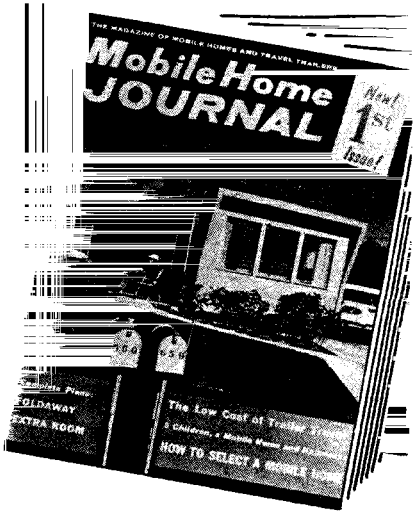
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